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Blind Eyes

by Margaret Peterson

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BLIND EYES

BY

MARGARET PETERSON

AUTHOR OF "THE LURE OF THE LITTLE DRUM"



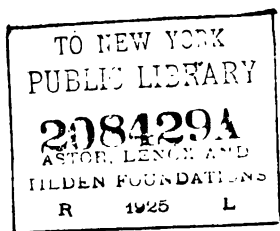
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BLIND EYES

CHAPTER I

MOONSHINE AND LAUGHTER

A BALL was in progress at the Royal Artillery Mess, Dampness. The supper dances had long ago been finished, the second extra at the end of the evening was drawing to an end. In the big, austere dining hall, hung with trophies of past R.A. sportsmen and the swords and weapons of centuries ago, decorated to-night with a profusion of flags and flowers, a few remaining couples revolved and swayed and clung together to the strains of "Salome"—always a favourite waltz with the band after supper and several draughts of beer had caused the notes of the music to be somewhat blurred to their ears. On the raised dais at the end of the room one or two jaded yet still patient mother chaperones sat and nodded. All attempts at conversation between them had long since ceased, they were now merely trying to keep awake until such time as dear Molly or

Rose or Joan should be ready to come home, but as the Commandant had definitely announced, with the full prerogative of his position and absolutely unmoved by the persuasions of his youngest daughter, that there was to be only one more extra after this and then "God save the King," their trial of patience was nearly over.

Outside, in contrast to the blaze of light and heat and colour in the ballroom, that strange calm, which holds the world for just one short hour before the breaking of another day, reigned. It is the twilight of the dawn. A very faint, far-away moon hung listless in a sky of the deepest, softest purple, the stars had one by one faded from her side, her own light would be extinguished in another half-hour by those fingers of dawn which lay across the Eastern horizon, pale streaks of indefinite colour now, but only waiting their turn to blossom into blinding rays of gold. An hour for lovers, the wistful moon, the faint stirred breeze full of the scents of far-off trees and flowers; the soft breaking of great murmuring waves on the level sands, their mighty strength and power cloaked with the gentleness of love, symbolical almost of that strange force which rules and sways mankind, the force which for want of a better name they call Passion.

All these influences, unknown to herself, were having their effect on Cynthia Weston. She was intensely excited, vividly alive with the joy and rare wonder of youth. She had had, as she would have expressed it, a lovely time; she had looked pretty, the men's eyes had told her that, danced to bewildering, intoxicating

tunes all evening, and now—this was to be the crown of achievement on her evening's success—Harry Thornton was going to propose. Cynthia was sure of it, he had behaved up to now like all the heroes in fiction she had ever read of; now he was going to propose and her whole body thrilled with the knowledge. Let critics laugh if they will, it is wonderful to be seventeen and on the verge of hearing one's first proposal.

Certainly none of this radiant happiness appeared to have communicated itself to Harry Thornton. He sat beside her on the seat specially selected by himself—and to which he had implored her to come, because "The moon on the sea is so ripping, Miss Weston,"—stiff, and, to judge by his face, rather morose. He was very young too, and a far greater power than that which had set Cynthia agog with excitement held his heart. Harry was in love; it is not always as amusing to be in love as to be loved, youth feels the sorrow of love quite as bitterly though perhaps not so lastingly as manhood.

Cynthia, glancing sideways at his rather expressionless face, sighed a little impatiently and settling her skirts with a decided frou-frou of silk against silk, leant forward, tilting her chin on her hands.

"Well," she said—she could not quite keep the thrill of joyful anticipation out of her voice—"I've come, Dumpy, and there is very little moon to be seen anywhere, also the sea has gone to sleep. Is that all? shall we go back?"

"No, please wait," begged the boy. His voice was out of control, it sounded an absurd creak, even to

himself, and it made Cynthia turn to him with a little trill of laughter.

"You are catching cold, Dumpy," she said ; "we had better go back."

How beautiful she was ! how more than beautiful ! Her face shadowed in the faint light, the breeze waking her hair to soft curls, her young red mouth, her eyes that he knew were grey but that seemed now to be deep shimmery black, how beautiful ! The soft rise and fall of her breath, the slim lines of her body as she leant towards him, the tilted chin, the delicate white arms and hands, how beautiful ! With a quick intake of breath he drew his eyes away and the cigarette he had been getting ready to light broke in his fingers.

Cynthia watched him—must it be said with curiosity ? Youth was awake in her, youth and the thrill of the senses roused by excitement, by the music of the dances, by the influences of moon, night and sea. Much as a cat plays with a mouse, but not knowingly as cruel, Cynthia was intent on playing with her first victim.

"What is up ?" she asked, infusing a surprising amount of innocence into her voice. "Is it a bad cigarette ? You seem to be being a little unkind to it, or have you lost your matches ?"

"Don't !" Harry Thornton turned to her desperately, love gives one understanding in flashes ; just for a second he knew the uselessness of his quest and then forgot it in his passionate need of her. "For God's sake don't chaff me. Can't you see what I want to say, what I feel ? I—I——" the colour left his face, it seemed as if

his throat were closing on the words, they were so difficult to say. "Will you marry me, dear? I love you," he ended somewhat lamely, and sat staring at her.

Cynthia was disappointed. This was not how the heroes of romance made love. Where was the passionate being clutched to his heart, the awe-inspiring kisses she had read of? A chill seemed to have fallen on the excitement; it invaded her happiness, making her for one second feel like tears, and his eyes filled her with discomfort. She moved a little from him, and in quick defence against her own feelings summoned up a laugh.

"What a funny way to say it!" she said.

Her laugh, the lightness of her tone, acted like a dash of cold water on the boy's feelings. He stiffened and looked away from her out over the expanse of shimmering sea.

"Does it matter how it is said?" he asked hoarsely. "My heart seems so full I cannot find any words to tell you of it in. But I love you, Cynthia; if you loved me,"—he turned to her again, and again his eyes made her uncomfortable and she stirred restlessly—"it would change the whole world. There is nothing I couldn't do, if you loved me. As it is——" he paused for a second, hope was suddenly dead in his heart and he was very young, very anxious not to make too utter a fool of himself. "Perhaps I ought not to have spoken," he went on slowly, and with rather shaky fingers attempted the lighting of another cigarette, "but I am going

away you know, got my orders for China this morning. I couldn't leave you without asking you for some small hope. We could get married in three years, Cynthia ; it is a long time, but we are both young and I would work for you like a nigger, if only you loved me." He broke off, and threw away the second unlighted cigarette, turning to catch her hands.

"That is an absurd idea," objected Cynthia calmly. She let her hands rest in his unmoved. "How can either of us possibly know, Dumpy, what we shall want to do in three years ? If this is what you call making love, it isn't a bit amusing, and the band has just started on 'Hitchy-Koo' ; let us go back and dance it."

She rose as she spoke, and, still holding her hands, Harry stood up too. For one desperate second he was tempted to pull her into his arms, to kiss the soft red of her mouth, as his whole being was throbbing and longing to kiss her. The thought passed as quickly as it came ; he dropped her hands and turned towards the music.

"Yes," he said, "let's go back. I am sorry to have made such an absolute fool of myself."

Quick contrition swayed Cynthia, his tone was so absolutely miserable. She put a soft hand on his arm.

"I have hurt you somehow, Dumpy," she said. "I am sorry ; I didn't mean to." She drew a little nearer and lifted her face to his. "You may kiss me, if you want to," she whispered.

Harry Thornton looked down at her ; she did not know of the struggle raging in his breast or of how

tight his hands were clenched ; she only saw that his eyes were rather stern, his mouth set hard.

"No," he answered, and he literally shook off her hand, "I don't want to kiss you, and for God's sake don't touch me, Cynthia."

Then he turned very brusquely and strode towards the Mess, Cynthia rather humbly bringing up the rear.

At the door of the ballroom he turned to her, and Cynthia, stealing a glance at his face, thought it looked white and angry.

"You will be all right here," he said. "If you will excuse me, I won't come any further, Miss Weston."

"Aren't you going to dance this with me ? " asked Cynthia. The joy of the evening had fallen very flat ; once more she felt perilously near tears.

"I would rather not," answered Thornton, "if you will let me off."

"Dumpy !" begged Cynthia ; she half held out her hand to him, but Thornton had turned and gone.

Cynthia stood undecided ; she knew she had only to step inside the room to be riotously claimed by some partner or other but for the first time in her life the music was not tempting her to dance ; she wanted to go home, to put her head down on something soft, preferably a pillow, and to cry. It had been a hateful evening, she wanted to go home.

"Hullo !" a cheery voice hailed her from the passage, "There you are, young lady ; your devoted sister and myself have just finished the fifth supper of the evening waiting for you. Ready to come home ? "

Her sister : that brought a ray of comfort to Cynthia's heart ; she could tell her sister all about it and be sure of sympathy.

"Yes," she answered her brother-in-law, "I was looking for you and Mattie."

"Looking for us ! that is a likely yarn," Major Redwood laughed amiably. "You have an eye, young lady, that sternly declines to see anything in the way of chaperones until after the band has played 'God save the King.' Come along and have some soup."

"I don't want any soup." Cynthia's voice sounded a little peevish, such excessive good-humour in the face of her tragic feelings was annoying. "I am tired and I want to go home."

"Thank the Lord for that," remarked her brother-in-law. "Cut along then to the dressing-room. I'll shake Mattie awake and send her after you, we shall be going to bed by daylight as it is."

In that he was correct, dawn had taken possession of the outside world. The trees were awake with birds, the flowers in the gardens were shaking off the night dew and lifting their heads to catch the first kiss of the sun. The Redwoods and Cynthia walked home across the cricket field ; in Dampness the married officers' quarters lie inside cantonments, a row of snug red houses, each with their stretch of garden on the edge of the cricket field. The mess lies a little beyond them again, facing the sea, with tennis and croquet lawns between it and the cricket field, while away on the further side of that expanse of green stretches the golf

course, the rifle ranges, the sea wall, and then more sand and sea. There is only one cab in Dampness, and by common consent its use is left to the few married officers who are not granted quarters inside the cantonments and who have therefore to live outside in the village itself. The real residents of the place take a pride in walking to and from their entertainments—"everything is so handy," is a special boast of theirs.

"Where is young Thornton?" asked Major Redwood, as the three of them strolled across the cricket field towards their house. "Miss his sweet face!"

Mattie took a swift glance across her husband at Cynthia; she knew—when did she ever fail to know?—that something had ruffled her sister's serenity and guessed the reason. But the tears and depression were lifting from Cynthia's heart; she was a creature of swift impulses, the strongest of which was laughter. She ignored Mattie's anxious glance therefore, and, turning to her brother-in-law, caught at his arm.

"James," she said, "I have had a proposal—think, my very first—a proposal, isn't it fun!" She dropped his arm and holding out her skirts in mock dignity circled before them. "I am a woman now," she announced, heaven knows where she had found the quotation, "just wakened by a man's love."

CHAPTER II

SISTERS

CYNTHIA WESTON had lived with the Redwoods ever since her people, first her father and then her mother, had died. For that matter she had very few memories of ever having lived with any one else, and Mattie had figured in her mind as mother, long before the delicate real owner of that name had departed this life. Cynthia's recollections of her people and her babyhood were vague as the memories of a happy childhood nearly always are, but amongst them all Mattie as elder sister and nurse, Mattie as a very patient governess, Mattie as elder sister and companion, reigned supreme. She could remember no real times of unhappiness, Cynthia, the path of life had been made very smooth to her young feet, she had been enclosed and surrounded by love which shielded her and guarded her from all knowledge or thought of the evil in life. She might have had a lonely childhood, for she was the last baby to arrive to the Westons and she came after

an interval of nine years. The nurseries had to be reopened for little Cynthia, and by the time she reached seven her brother had grown up and gone out into the world and Mattie was a young lady. But Cynthia had not been lonely, at least she had never realized it; the household had moved and had its being round her, that she did not realize either; she only knew she was intensely happy and that life was vividly good.

Then had come the tragedy of death: with quiet and relentless feet he crept into the house, silencing the laughter, killing the joy. Cynthia had just reached her eighth year when her father died; she carried through life a confused memory of that week and the year that followed, partly because sorrow was hateful to her and her training had gone far to make her somewhat selfish. She resented illness and pain, they invaded life and threatened happiness, the one thing she considered essential to it, therefore she shut her mind to those recollections. But not altogether could she blot out the memory of that day when Mattie had come to fetch her in from her riotous play, Mattie with a face whitened and stiffened with pain but with tearless eyes.

"Mother wants you to come to her," she had said, and for one second it struck Cynthia that Mattie was angry with her because she had been laughing at the kitten, "you are to come with me."

So she had gone, but at the door of her father's room such unexplainable terrifying fear struck her that she had held back, dragging at Mattie's hand.

"I don't want to go in," she had whispered. "I am

afraid of people who are ill." And Mattie had turned on her a face she could scarce recognize, so stern had it become.

"He isn't ill any more," she had said, "and you and I have got to try and think of mother now."

Then she had opened the door and Cynthia had caught one glimpse of the long white silent figure on the bed, the calm, closed face, her mother's kneeling figure, and with a shriek of absolute terror that ended in a tornado of sobs she had broken from her sister's hand and fled from the house.

It was the first, almost the only, quarrel she ever had with Mattie. Not that Mattie ever opened the subject between them, only during that period of mourning and for a little while afterwards, Cynthia knew herself disapproved of. She crept back to favour slowly; Mattie's grief was so deep, so unforgettable, and Cynthia's laugh, which came back almost before the tears were dried, jarred on the elder girl, she could not understand it.

Then came Mattie's marriage and the shadow lifted for a little from the Weston's house, only to descend with deeper intensity when a fortnight later, breaking short Mattie's honeymoon, Mrs. Weston too died.

Mattie had time to get home before the end, had time to hold the frail white hands in hers and listen to the whispered messages.

"I have tried to hold on for Cynthia's sake," Mrs. Weston told her, "but I leave her with you, Mattie, she

is your baby almost as much as mine. Do you remember how you mothered her from the first?"

"I remember, mother," Mattie answered.

"You'll keep her with you till she marries, Mattie; find her a good man—it is what I hoped to wait for, but somehow there is no fight left in me. I am glad to go, Mattie, and I leave her in good hands, dear; be patient with her, we have spoilt her, you and I, my little Cynthia."

So the mother influence faded out of Cynthia's life but not the love; that stayed with Mattie. Not even to her own children who came in due course did she hand out such a wealth of understanding love as she did to Cynthia, and Cynthia took up her abode with the Redwoods, moving from station to station in the soldier life, till finally Major Redwood stepped into a four years' billet and the family came to settle at Dampness. By that time there were three little Redwoods and Cynthia was seventeen, a young lady on the verge of coming out.

Many were the heart-burnings that Mattie Redwood had with herself during that period; had she fitted Cynthia sufficiently for life, ought she to tell her more of its forces and pitfalls, or was innocence to be left at complete ignorance as it had been in her own case? She could not judge, she was so anxious to do only what would make for Cynthia's happiness. For herself she had been told nothing, had gone into marriage with bandaged eyes, not even because she loved but because her mother seemed to wish it, and she was happy, more happy now than she could say. But the truth of

life had not been pleasant learning, it had shattered her dreams, darkened for a little her outlook upon the world. Only to herself—Mattie, so rich in understanding towards others, kept most things to herself—did she admit how it had hurt her to find the dreams she had been brought up on shattered to fragments at the first hint of truth. More than anything else in the world she wanted to keep such an experience from Cynthia. Yet how to do it; how put into words what she had to say? Once before she had attempted some such explanation; she could hardly look back on the effort as a success.

It had been just before the arrival of the last little Redwood, Cynthia was growing up, something must be explained to her. Under the young girl's curious, inquisitive eyes Mattie struggled with the truth, blushing from the roots of her hair to her toes, and it had not assisted her much to see disconcerted, ill-concealed horror growing in the eyes that watched her.

"It is like a flower, dear," she ended bravely, "that grows under ground for so long before it blossoms out. When you understand about it properly, as I cannot hope to explain it to you, you will see how wonderful and beautiful it is, the little life that blossoms and grows within our own."

"Beautiful!" Cynthia's whole face was ablaze, "beautiful! Oh, Mattie, how can you! I think it is disgusting, and—" there was a break in the words, a quick rush of tears, "and it's like the cat."

With which disconcerting remark she flew from the

room, banging the door behind her, voicing her feelings later on in a rigid disapproval of the new arrival.

That had been rather a bitter time for Mattie Redwood, because it seemed to push Cynthia out of her encircling arms and the girl was growing away from her. They were still good companions, but between them had grown up an indefinite shadow of silence and constraint, which Cynthia light-heartedly ignored, but of which Mattie was always hurtfully conscious. It was this shadow that made her hesitate now: why should it be her own hand that built up walls and differences between them? She was afraid in fact of what Cynthia's attitude would be towards knowledge, perhaps because her own hurt dreams stayed in the background of her mind and interfered with her having a perfectly just and unbiassed view herself.

The question of Thornton's proposal, however, reopened the old doubt, and when Major Redwood came to bed on the evening of the ball, after a final cigar, it was to find Mattie—quite against her usual custom—wide awake.

"Hullo, Mattie," he remonstrated, "have you realized there are only about two hours' sleep ahead of you? or are you going to dispense with slumber altogether?"

"I am worried about Cynthia," Mattie explained.

"Oh, that," her husband retorted good-naturedly. He stretched one leg after the other and rolled into bed. "I'll have the young cub up to-morrow and ask him what the devil he means. Don't know what young

men are coming to nowadays—proposing, mind you, when he can't possibly marry for ten years. I'll learn him."

"I am not exactly worried about that," Mattie put in, "though I am sorry for the boy; you are to leave him alone, Jimmie. It's Cynthia."

"You don't think her young affections are touched, do you?" asked Major Redwood, "didn't appear so to me; but I very rarely understand that sister of yours."

"Oh no, not that either," Mattie answered. "I am wondering whether perhaps, since she is old enough to be proposed to, I ought not to try and tell her something about what life means. She knows nothing, you know, Jimmie, and——"

"Don't you believe it," Major Redwood chuckled, and punching the pillow to a satisfactory angle rolled over, turning his back on the discussion, "modern young ladies know more about everything than you ever dreamt of, and if she doesn't, old girl, time enough to tell her when she looks like getting married. Now, for heaven's sake, stop worrying about that wretched sister of yours and go to sleep."

He followed that advice himself very speedily, but Mattie lay for some time watching dawn broaden into daylight outside and listening to the noise of the birds.

And despite her husband's advice, her mind was not at all made up which course to take when she and Cynthia found themselves alone in the drawing-room after dinner the next night. Cynthia, dressed in one of her old schoolroom dresses, since this was to be a quiet and

early to bed evening, looked ridiculously young. It seemed like a child playing at grown-upness, the soft fluffy hair tied with a blue ribbon, the flushed cheeks, the short frock down to hardly below her knees. She dropped into a favourite position of hers, when coffee and Major Redwood had left the room together, on the floor at Mattie's feet, hunched up, her hands clasping her knees. Mattie was of course knitting: there was never a single minute of the day when Mattie was not working at something or other.

"Tired after last night?" she asked, putting her work down for a second and glancing at her sister.

Cynthia poised the tip of her chin on her knees and blinked up at her. "Not more than just nicely," she said, "only feeling flat. Last night was splendid, you know, and to-day—well, I don't suppose any one will propose to me again for some time to come."

Mattie resumed her knitting. "Did you see Mr. Thornton to-day?" she asked.

"In the distance," Cynthia admitted, "didn't you? He looked, well, sulky, and was awfully careful not to see me." She laughed a little.

"Dear," Mattie's work paused again, "you are being a little unkind, aren't you? He looked wretchedly unhappy and he is only a boy and very much in love. You don't know what that means, do you?"

"No," acknowledged Cynthia; "did you, before you married Jimmie? I gather that it means," she went on solemnly, but there was a mischievous glint at the back of the grey eyes, "that one is filled with an insane

longing to hold some particular person's hand and kiss her, and, that as kissing outside the bonds of matrimony is immoral, it is expedient to propose to the person you wish to kiss. At least that is what men feel; women, I suppose, like being kissed or they wouldn't marry. By the way," she paused a second and her eyes seemed to be pondering something, "I asked Dumpy to kiss me last night, and he wouldn't. How am I to know whether I like it or not before I try."

"Cynthia!" Mattie laid down her knitting altogether, "you talk so lightly about it, dear. Oh, I know you are trying to shock me, and I put just exactly that value on your words, only love is a very great, very powerful force in the world; don't put yourself to play against it little sister—in the end it may hurt you. And as for marriage, whichever way you look at it Cynthia, a man is paying a woman the highest honour he knows of when he asks her to be his wife. Did you think of that last night?"

Cynthia tilted back her head and broke into song, the sweetest, lightest trill of a voice.

"We were not born with true love to trifle," she chanted.

"I don't see that it is doing me such an honour to want to kiss me, Mattie," she remonstrated, the song finished.

"Marriage," began Mattie solemnly, but Cynthia sprang to her feet, shaking her skirts, clapping her hands.

"Not a lecture, Mattie," she begged, "I couldn't bear it to-night. I have an inward conviction you are

going to mention babies, something I read in the Marriage Service last Sunday during the sermon leads me to that belief, and you know my sentiments there; if marriage means babies as well as being kissed I would rather be immoral—really and truly I couldn't stand babies."

In the face of that, with the old antagonistic shadow awake between them, what could Mattie do. Only one thing she was certain of; Cynthia, unlike the modern girl of her husband's remarks, did not know everything; the telling of it had been put off for a little, that was all.

CHAPTER III

“IL-Y-A TOUJOURS UN QUI BAISE ”

CLENNEL RICHARDSON tilted back his chair and frowned at the ceiling. His handsome intolerant face wore a scowl; the blue eyes, light but with very long heavy lashes, were discontented, the mouth set angrily under the stiff small moustache. His hands were thrust deep in his pockets, his feet, slender and well formed, were stretched out, beautifully clad in the most radiant of socks. He was nice to look at, stamped with that unmistakable if undefinable air of breeding and generations of aristocrats. Some people would have tried to define it by noting the very clean cut of head and chin, the close small ears that lay flat to his head, the sleek shine of hair. But it went deeper than that, it was ingrained in the easy carriage of his body, the set of his head, the calm insolence of his look. He was not universally popular, Clennel Richardson; no one had ever been known to allude to him as a good sort and in some odd fashion this knowledge worried

and irritated him. He had a passion for popularity that was hardly believable, and one that frequently, even in its most earnest efforts, frustrated its own end. He had a reputation, with other men at least, for being unnecessarily noisy and conceited, and the latest joined subaltern had irreverently christened him "The Problem" because Richardson wasn't quite sure whether he had made God or God had made him. Sometimes he could be amusing, for he was not in any sense lacking in brains, and his money, of which he had a not inconsiderable amount, he spent lavishly. As for women, some worshipped him, some—but very few—hated him, all admired him. He had what is known as a 'way with women,' had learnt to perfection those little services and attentions so dear to the female heart which the ordinary male lavishes only once in his lifetime, and then for a short period, upon the woman whom he hopes to make his wife. Clennel bestowed them indiscriminately. He knew at once if a woman were tired, if she needed sympathy, if she required gaiety; he fetched and carried for her with a courtly grace that robbed the action of all humility. He was always passionately devoted to some shade of hair or coloured eyes. There was only one essential he asked from women and that was that they should be married; girls were unnecessary evils and dangers in society.

It was a married woman who sat opposite him now, in this little back room of a swagger hotel. Sat, crouched forward rather, her head with its wonderful wealth of copper-coloured hair buried in her hands, her whole

form shaken with sobs of despair or rage. She was dressed for travelling, in a coat and skirt of rather vivid brown, and her hat, gay and trimmed with the latest thing in stiff, upstanding feathers, lay on the sofa beside her. She had apparently been sobbing for some time, for the pocket-handkerchief on her lap was soaked through, and the face which she raised presently was flushed and stained with tears.

"It amounts to that, doesn't it?" she said, finishing a conversation which had been in progress before the storm began; "You are tired of me, you want me to go out of your life as quietly and decently as I can, Clennel," her voice broke again, she held out her hands rather pathetically.

Richardson brought the front of his chair down to earth again and glanced at her. She had not improved her appearance by the outburst, the eyelids of the amber-hued eyes he had in past days said so many polite things about were pink and swollen, a face set under copper-coloured hair should never flush, and into the bargain he hated the woman who makes a scene. Perhaps she realized something of this, for with rather unsteady steps she rose and crossed over to the looking-glass that adorned the mantelpiece, putting up instinctive hands to her hair.

"What a fright I have made of myself," she said. It was only her beauty that had held him hers, what a fool she had been to forget it in this their last interview. "Well," she said, turning from the survey of herself to the man again, "I have finished making a noise now,

Clennel, and I am absolutely hideous." There was the courage of desperation in her voice. "I am sorry, dear, if I have made it uncomfortable for you, but I love you, Clennel, it hurts to have one's love torn up by the roots." It was the back of his sleek head she was talking to ; with a choked back sob of hopelessness she turned to the glass. "Will you hand me my hat?" she said, "I suppose we ought to be getting back."

Richardson rose with alacrity. "It isn't that I don't love you, Mabel," he explained, as he stood behind her watching her arrange her veil, the faint pleasant scent of violets which he had learnt to associate with her was waking his mind to kinder thoughts, "it is that I have to go off to this rotten spot, Dampness, or whatever it is called, for my course, and you know we should have had to stop these expeditions sooner or later." His eyes travelled round the small rather sordid room. "They are dangerous, and it is hardly in either of our minds to risk a scandal, is it?"

"Oh, don't bother to explain," the woman begged. She looked at him with her strange coloured eyes and her face was beautiful again behind the shadow of her veil. "Explanations are the death of love. You loved me, and you don't love me, that is all, Clennel. You are quite within your rights. After to-day I shan't blame you, to-day I have been a fool." She turned towards the door, Clennel was before her to open it.

"We are to be friends always, Amber?" he asked, us theing name he had invented for her and infusing a surprising amount of feeling into his voice.

The woman looked at him, pausing for just one second in the doorway to let her eyes rest on his. "Yes, friends," she answered, her mouth twisted a little, it was hardly a smile, and she was gone, leaving behind her that faint yet fragrant scent of violets.

Clennel stood, the door carefully closed behind her, inhaling the faint perfume, the frown back on his forehead, then he lifted his hand to brush up his moustache and from the sleeve of his coat picked off a long thin thread of copper. "There goes ma belle," he whispered almost aloud, and blew lightly at the thread, but contrary to expectation it did not float away but flickered and wound itself more tightly round his outstretched fingers. "Damn all women with red hair," he was moved to commune to himself, as he disentangled the hair and set it free. "I shall have to steer clear of them in future, they are very tenacious."

Society at Dampness was always rather pleasantly stirred by the arrival of the Field Course. Their presence brought a thrill of new endeavour to matron and maid, dinners were given, dances were arranged in their honour, the small peaceful garrison town lived during their short visit of six weeks in a feverish, withal delightful whirl of gaiety. It was at a dinner party given by the Commandant to welcome the Field Course that Captain Richardson first met Cynthia. His eyes lit on her the moment he entered the room ; she and a very young man were standing together in a little window alone at the end of the room. The deep shade of the velvet curtains behind her showed Cynthia's face, delicate and exquisite

in colour, the little tip-tilted nose, the soft hair that broke into rebellious curls wherever it could get free from the broad band of cerise ribbon holding it in place. The young man was earnestly intent on fastening the buttons of the gloved hand which Cynthia was holding out to him, and both were so occupied that Captain Richardson had worked his way over to them and had stood, his eyes fixed on Cynthia's face, for some time before they noticed him.

He was fascinated—not for a second did he attempt to deny that. Not even the slight shock caused by learning that Cynthia was a Miss Weston could lessen the effect, never had he so industriously striven to make himself pleasant in a woman's eyes before. He took Cynthia into dinner, that was the fortune of war and he was wildly hilariously gay about it. He swept Cynthia just a little off her feet, both then and after dinner, when he once more sought her out and brought forth all his social attractions for her benefit. He sang, at his hostess's request, indifferently well but with his eyes always on Cynthia; he was indefatigable in his desire to make her laugh, for the dimples that crept round her mouth, the way her lips parted, the shine of her little teeth when she smiled, intoxicated him. He congratulated himself upon having made at least an impression by the end of the evening, his personality had certainly dominated the rest of the guests, and Cynthia had promised to play golf with him on the following day.

"He is terribly noisy, Mattie," she explained on the

way home, "but I think he is nice, don't you, and he did seem to be more friendly than the general run of Field men."

The residents of Dampness had a private not uncalled for opinion that the Field Course gave themselves airs.

"Yes, he was very friendly," agreed Mattie: there was some reserve at the back of her voice.

"He was drunk, if you ask me," put in Major Redwood. He had viewed Richardson most of the evening with intense disfavour. "Hate that type of man."

Cynthia was not much affected by her brother-in-law's remarks. Captain Richardson had amused her in the first instance, she found him still more attractive when they played golf together. For then, with no audience to watch him, he was quieter, more just of a good companion, and together they talked and laughed to their hearts' content. Before they were halfway through the afternoon Cynthia knew that the man admired her. Richardson was clever with his compliments, and indeed in this case they came straight from his heart; he did think—as a man well caught in the flood of love does think—that Cynthia was absolutely beautiful. And the knowledge pleased the girl, excited her, thrilled her even in much the same way as Thornton's young, badly expressed love had thrilled her with the joy of life. She did not fall in love with the man, but she was already half in love with love, and Richardson had sufficient knowledge

and experience of women to make him a very perfect wooer.

He did nothing to hide his feelings either. All Dampness watched with excitement the progress of his courtship; he meant to win Cynthia for his wife. Feelings that he had had no knowledge of before were awake in his heart, he wanted her not only for her beauty or the joy that she could give him, but so that he could guard and care for her, make a home for her, see her with children—their children—in her arms. He had never loved like that before, the other women in his life faded from his memory, he honestly forgot them, and still more wonderful he forgot himself.

The only people not fully awake to what was happening were the Redwoods, partly because Cynthia, conscious perhaps that her new lover would not be looked on with approval, did her best to hoodwink or at least keep all the truth from them, and, since Redwood went out very little, she had only Mattie to blind and that was not difficult. Mattie knew that Richardson was an ardent admirer, but she also thought that she knew Cynthia considered him rather noisy and conceited, and rested content with that knowledge.

The golf course at Dampness runs adjacent to the sea; there is one portion of it where one turns at the seventh hole towards home again, and there it touches even on to the sea wall itself. If one climbs over the wall at this point one can drop down on to soft yellow sand; the sun warms it into a nest of gold, the wall shuts off the world from it, it faces on to the wide-

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moving sea and far-away passing ships. Richardson had discovered this spot, so he claimed, and on blazing hot afternoons it was not difficult to persuade Cynthia to lay aside the golf clubs and drop down into it for a rest while he smoked a cigarette. Then he would pile the sand to a comfortable cushion for her back, unearth the parasol which, ever since the first afternoon, had been carried unprofessionally among the golf clubs, and tilt it against the sun, so that her soft flushed face, brown curls and shining eyes were in shadow. For himself he would lie on the sand beside her and talk of abstract things, of men and women, of books and songs, till finally and always the conversation would touch back on love and Cynthia would drop the lashes over her eyes, because his eyes and their message made her uneasy and a little self-conscious. He taught her to flirt, and before he knew it she was a past mistress in the art; he did not realize in the least, because girls had never entered his life before, how unknowingly she played with fire. He thought she flirted as he was accustomed to flirt, with the joy of never knowing when the deeper floods of passion might not take possession of the game.

"I don't believe in love at first sight," stated Cynthia on one of these afternoons: she took up a handful of sand and let it run through her fingers. "I am not always sure that I believe in love at all,"—she dimpled, her eyes met his and wavered—"not at first sight, anyway," she reasserted.

"Don't you?" asked Richardson: his hand caught

the sand as it fell from hers and shook it free again. "It is not a question of believing with me, I know it is true."

"Have you done it often?" asked Cynthia; the smile broke into a laugh.

"Only once in my life," said Richardson. He sat up and leant forward, Cynthia was moved to think how nice-looking he was with the sun just catching the gold lights in his hair. "One doesn't love more than once really, you know," he went on, "the other thing that comes into one's life for this woman or that isn't love."

"Oh!" commented Cynthia. Somehow when his eyes were not on her she was always tempted to probe the matter a little further. "Funny thing, love, isn't it?" she asked lightly; "why do people pretend they get any joy out of holding hands and looking at each other? I have tried holding hands," she asserted boastfully, "it doesn't make me feel anything, and I am sure people squint when they gaze into each other's eyes."

"Perhaps they do," assented the man slowly; "I suppose they don't stop to think about it at the time." He lapsed back into silence, and suddenly from right over their heads a lark's song invaded the air with shrill, penetrating joy.

Cynthia tilted back her sunshade and looked up at the little speck floating against the deep blue of the sky. She felt Richardson's hand close over hers where it lay on the sand and with something that amounted almost to fear in her heart she attempted to ignore the action.

"I wonder how he can sing so near to the sun on an afternoon as hot as this," she said, but her voice on the words was a little uncertain, and she made no attempt to draw her hand away.

Perhaps she could not, things were a little hazy to her eyes, she was only grateful that the man did not look up at her, she felt sure she was staring at him with her mouth open, and his hand on her hand was numbing her heart. She was going to faint, she decided vaguely. Then Richardson lifted his head and their eyes met, blue eyes ablaze with desire, grey eyes piteous in their ignorance.

"Cynthia," the man whispered, his voice hoarse; he drew nearer to her, putting his arm across her knees, and still his eyes held hers and his face blotted out the rest of the world from her sight.

It is to be believed that her very powerlessness to respond or repel, the dumb question in her frightened eyes, brought the truth to Richardson as nothing else could have done. He realized in that second how ignorant had been the game she had so charmingly played to his teaching, and, because he really loved her, before those bewildered eyes his own fell hastily and he leant forward, burying his head against the cool, blue linen of her frock.

"I love you, Cynthia, that is what I am trying to tell you, and I am doing it very badly, if I have made you frightened of me."

With his eyes away from hers the spell lifted, Cynthia shivered a little, and, drawing her hands away from his,

looked down aloofly at his sleek head where it lay on her lap. She wanted to cry, to laugh, to scream, what did she want to do! Her lips trembled, the colour came back slowly to her face. Perhaps this was love, curious fear and elation struggled in her heart. She put out a timid hand and touched his hair, suddenly she knew he was unhappy about something and her body ached to comfort him. She slipped back her hand into his.

"I think I love you too," she whispered.

Up against the clear sky the triumph of the lark broke out again, he at any rate was untroubled as to the glory of his love, he poured it forth, a serene and uninterrupted song of gladness from all the fullness of his heart.

CHAPTER IV

CYNTHIA BECOMES ENGAGED

SO Cynthia became engaged. There were just one or two things that disturbed the radiance of this time to her mind, but she mentioned them to no one, least of all to Mattie. In some strange way Mattie seemed to be slipping into the background of Cynthia's life, not that she was consciously shut out, only vaguely, as in the year of her father's death, Cynthia felt herself disapproved of, knew that Mattie did not, could not, like Clennel, and for the time being Clennel's influence had Cynthia bound hand and foot. Mattie stood aside patiently and watched ; her heart ached, the customary ache of motherhood which knows itself unwanted and disregarded now that the babe has grown to man's estate. But, as ever, Mattie hid her pain under coldness and silence, and it was that, together with Major Redwood's stern and open disapproval of the whole affair, that prevented Cynthia from taking her joys or doubts to her sister.

"I am an awfully bad smell to your family, dear," Clennel was in the habit of cheerfully acknowledging.

He did not mind their dislike, but, unfortunately, the mere fact of a disapproving critic in the room always caused him to appear in his noisiest and most objectionable mood. It was little wonder that Mattie found it impossible to approve of him but it was unfortunate that just at this period in her life, when Cynthia most needed guidance and sympathy, she and Mattie stood so far apart from each other as to make clear understanding impossible between them.

Unable to voice her feelings or questions to Mattie, Cynthia turned instinctively more and more to Clennel. She expected, and in a way extracted, the same type of affection from him as she had always received from Mattie.

"One couldn't sin badly and terribly without knowing it, could one, Clen?" she asked once.

They had been sitting out a dance, or rather a succession of dances, on the same seat that had a year before witnessed Thornton's stammered proposal. Poor Thornton, by this time *millions* of miles away in China! There had come to them that hushed pause which descends at times on lovers whose very kisses have left them numb and tired. Clennel's kisses often made Cynthia breathless and a little agitated. They woke such strange tremors to life in her heart, and at the same time they drugged and quieted her mind. Perhaps, more than anything else, they frightened her; it was fright, anyway, that lay behind her question.

"I shouldn't think so, dear," Richardson answered.

He bent forward to touch with his lips the soft curls on the nape of her neck. "At least, I couldn't."

Cynthia, only a trifle reassured, moved uneasily. "It comes to the same thing," she suggested; "for you wouldn't let me do anything that you knew was wrong, would you?"

The argument was involved. Cynthia was struggling with some far back memory, picked up from an old nurse, as to how girls who were always kissing got what they deserved when shame and an unwanted baby were their portion. Richardson could not be expected to know that, but he did guess at a little of the trouble and his eyes grew very tender as he watched her.

"I would give my life to prevent wrong from touching you, dear," he assured her; "you need never be afraid of me."

He meant it at the time. There was in his attitude towards Cynthia something finer and bigger than he had ever felt towards women before. He worshipped her, and she learnt to look on his love as worship. She was in return very fond of him; his personal looks, his smartness, all appealed to her immensely, and if she liked him most when he was not the lover but only the companion, she put that down to the fact that physical contact with a man filled her with an unexplainable sense of shyness. It was only a question of getting used to it, she presumed, and rather pathetically ignored the feeling as much as possible.

Their wedding was not to take place until the next

year, so much the Redwoods had insisted on, and urging the fact that by then Cynthia's brother, who was at present in India, would be in England, they carried the day. Clennel spent a month's leave at Dampness after his course was over, and then took his departure to put in a brief turn of military duty at Malta. From there he wrote, strenuously and regularly, passionate letters to Cynthia : his arms were longing to hold her to him, his mouth was hungry for her kisses. And Cynthia, blushing sometimes at the vividness of his language, would write, in answer, funny little letters that did their best to meet his demands. As a matter of fact she was convinced by this time that she loved him, the feeling of shyness was not in evidence while his actual presence was not near, she almost forgot that she had ever felt it.

The pity of it was that Clennel and his letters remained like a wall between the two sisters, and though they went about together and spent their days as in the time before Cynthia's engagement, neither of them could ignore or forget the fact. All idea as to talking to Cynthia of love and marriage had left Mattie's heart, she knew instinctively that any such attempt would be resented, besides the old tender intimacy that had been between them, and that would have made such a conversation possible, had gone.

Clennel was to be home for a month's leave at Christmas and it had been arranged that Cynthia was to spend a fortnight of this time with him at his mother's house in the country. It was to be Cynthia's introduction to his

family—so far she knew them only as the writers of polite letters of congratulation. Not till all arrangements had been definitely made did Cynthia realize that this was to be the first Christmas she was to spend away from Mattie, and it was a small comfort to the elder sister that Cynthia did at the last moment remember and regret. But it was, of course, by then too late to change any of the plan. Cynthia was to meet Richardson in town and travel down with him to Wrotham, his family's place in the country.

Cynthia, there was no denying it, was deplorably nervous as she stood on the platform of Charing Cross station waiting for Clennel's train to arrive. He had been away six months, what would he look like, how would she like being kissed again? Clennel looked at least very much the same, he was out of his carriage before the train stopped even and had rushed at Cynthia, seizing her two hands, staring down at her, regardless of the fact that he had rugs and a good deal of luggage to collect. He did not kiss her, for which she was profoundly grateful, because for the moment he appeared to her eyes as a total stranger, and her inner self was rather disapproving of his noisy voice and abrupt movements. Then, his luggage disposed of, they took a taxi across to Victoria Station and in the taxi he turned to her eagerly and pulled her into his arms. But he was still a stranger to her, in a vague way she resented his kisses and always kept her mouth from his. Clennel noticed the fact, and gathered from her attitude that she was shy. The idea pleased him, he had never

liked the too willing woman, and he was quick to change his tone to suit hers.

By the end of the short train journey Cynthia was completely at her ease with him again, though professing intense nervousness at the thought of meeting his family. She clung to his arm when the train stopped at Wrotham and insisted that while she was being introduced to his people he should let her stand with one hand in his pocket holding on to him to give her courage. There was, however, no one at the station, though the large grey car had been sent to meet them which showed they were expected by that train.

"How many people will be there, Glen?" Cynthia asked for the twentieth time as the car swung in between white gates up a long sweep of gravel drive.

"The mater, who will probably scare the life out of you to start with but who is really very harmless, Nina, and perhaps Frank," he answered. "Oh, and probably a detachment of Nina's young men—she always has a crowd hanging round. I dare say," he added as an afterthought, "that a good few people will roll up to-morrow, the house is generally full at Christmas."

The good few people were there already, Cynthia realized. It seemed to her as she followed in Clennel's wake that the vast drawing-room was packed with people all of whom appeared to be talking at once. From the centre tea-table set near the large fireplace a beautiful, slim, draped figure rose to greet them, some one who, holding Clennel by the hands, kissed him languidly on both cheeks.

"My dearest boy," she murmured, and Clennel replied with something like, "Well, old mater."

Then he turned, one hand still in his mother's, and Cynthia, lifting bewildered eyes, saw what appeared to be a rather delicate lady of thirty-three or thirty-four, with wonderfully arranged red-gold hair and tired blue eyes. "She doesn't look in the least like any one's mother," thought Cynthia, as she followed the gracious presence to a seat at the tea-table.

Clennel was immediately surrounded by a host of clamorous friends, who all of them alluded to him as "Bunny" and appeared to find something intensely humorous in his being engaged. Mrs. Richardson introduced Cynthia rather vaguely to them all as "my daughter-in-law to be," and one or two of the men proceeded to make themselves useful in the way of handing her tea and cakes. There was another tea-party in progress at the other end of the long room. "Nina's bun worry," one of the men informed Cynthia and added, "Have you met Miss Richardson?"

"No," explained Cynthia, "I haven't met any of them before, you know; this is the first time I have seen any of Clen's relations."

"Oh," agreed the man; he felt sorry for the palpably shy girl. "We are a bit noisy but we mean well, most of us."

"We have put Cynthia in the room next yours, Clen," Mrs. Richardson remarked, seizing an opportunity when there was a little lull in the conversation. "Will you take her up and show her round? We are dining to-

night at seven, Nina has some dance or something on afterwards." She turned to Cynthia with a weary expression on her face. "Nina is very tiring," she remarked; "I often wonder why I should have been blessed with a daughter—boys are much easier."

If the house as a whole impressed Cynthia with a sense of awe at its magnificence, her own room filled her with delight. It was so fresh, so sunny cornered, so beautifully arranged and decorated. The one wide window, hung with rose-pink curtains, looked out at the woods at the back of the house; the carpet was the softest furriest carpet she had ever seen with big splashes of pink roses on a cream background; a frieze of roses in exactly the same colour ran round the walls, edging a paper of cream; the quilt on the bed, the china on the washstand all carried out the same colour scheme. It was a bower of roses, and on the mantelpiece, above a fire that glowed and blinked a welcome at her, was set a small silver bowl of deep, deep red roses.

"They must have cost quite two shillings each," thought Cynthia with a little sigh; sometimes the fact of all the wealth that Richardson was to shower on her by just marrying her, overpowered her.

Her box had been unpacked and a discerning maid had laid out on the bed the dress which she considered looked the most suitable for an informal early dinner.

"Nina's maid will look in presently, I expect," Clennel had said, and Cynthia set to work somewhat nervously to get as much of her dressing finished as was possible before such an unknown quantity as a maid

should arrive to disturb her peace. She had, as it happened, reached the stage of slipping into her dress when the dreaded knock came on the door.

"Come in," Cynthia said. "Thank goodness," she said to herself, "she hasn't arrived in time to watch me do my hair."

The door opened quietly, and Cynthia, intent with her last hook and eye, paid no attention until the fact that the door was apparently being left open caused her to look up at the incomer.

A girl stood in the door, a slim figure entirely dressed in black, close cut and shimmery black, out of which the undraped shoulders and neck rose marvellously pure and white. The face was white, the perfect shaped lips a little lacking in colour, but the hair was glorious, living gold, brushed smooth and sleek round and round the small head as if it were a crown of glory. Having caught Cynthia's attention the girl came a little further into the room and shut the door behind her.

"You are Cynthia, aren't you?" she asked. "I suppose Clennel has mentioned me vaguely in passing—I am Nina."

She advanced across the room to opposite the long mirror, there her reflected self appeared to occupy her attention, and Cynthia realized that her polite murmur of welcome was not being listened to. She felt absurdly shy, it was a peculiarity of Nina's and one which was not conducive to popularity, that her presence generally caused other women to feel shy and badly dressed. Cynthia had just decided that her own blue

dress was hideously cut and that her hands were most horribly large and red in colour, when her visitor, the calm survey finished, turned to her again.

"You are pretty," she remarked reflectively, "but I wonder why Clennel fell in love with you. You aren't a bit the kind of girl that gets kissed in the conservatory."

Cynthia laughed, the shyness was beginning to disappear, partly because Nina's way of saying things was so exactly like Clennel's.

"What has that got to do with it?" she queried.

"Oh, well, I don't know," answered Nina. She turned her attention once more to the looking-glass. "You know how that German philosopher man, whom every one gets so shocked about, puts it: 'There are only two types of women, the Mother and the Prostitute.' I belong to the latter, you, I should think, to the former; and so far Clennel's leanings have been towards my type, that's all."

Cynthia knew very vaguely the meaning of the last name, the first she did understand.

"I don't like babies, if that is what you mean," she hastened to explain. "I hope I shall never have any."

The wonderful violet eyes surveyed her quizzically. "You had better take lessons in how to prevent them then before you marry Clennel. He is probably hoping to carry on the family name and so forth. How nicely you blush," she went on, "I believe I have shocked you."

Cynthia struggled with the truth. "No," she

announced firmly, "only I hadn't thought about it in that light."

"Humph!" commented Nina, a mischievous light dawned in her eyes. "Well, when the time comes you ask me and I will give you a few tips. Meanwhile," she put out her hands and Cynthia came across to take them, "I think I am going to like you, though I can't say that of girls in general. Shall we be friends?"

"Yes, please," whispered Cynthia. "I think you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen," she added.

Thus artlessly sealing, for the time being at any rate, the bond of friendship between them.

CHAPTER V

POOR COLUMBINE

THEY were friends—it was one of the strangest phases in Cynthia's life, her friendship for and with Nina Richardson. Where all else failed, and where estrangement to Mattie crept in entirely, Cynthia clung to Nina's friendship as the one solid thing in a crumbling world. They had from the beginning nothing in common, Cynthia was to learn many things, about and from Nina, most of which shocked and horrified her; they made no difference, daily did Cynthia alter her outlook on life, her ideas of right and wrong so that they should coincide with Nina's. She thought Nina the most wonderful person she had ever seen or heard of, and there was little wonder in that, the only thing strange in their relations was that Nina should trouble to bring, as she undoubtedly did, all the power of her fascinations to bear on Cynthia. From the first she took as much pains to win the girl as she had ever taken over any man. It was not from any love of Clennel either,

between Nina and her brother there had always existed a thinly veiled dislike, but even this fact, and Nina made no attempt to conceal it, did not worry Cynthia, she was still fond of Clennel ; having such a wonderful sister added to his attraction.

Most of Nina's conversation, her notions on life, her views and morals, passed completely over Cynthia's head. She did not understand Nina's allusions and Nina never descended to facts because Cynthia for some reason best known to herself feigned absolute knowledge. Probably she was afraid that Nina would think her a fool if she owned to not understanding. The impression Nina really gathered was that Cynthia was a bit of a prude, she herself had been such a strenuous searcher after knowledge since the age of twelve that she never dreamt of the possibility of Cynthia being ignorant. She had, strangely enough for her, no intense desire to shock Cynthia, therefore there were some things she touched on so delicately that Cynthia, hearing, could yet remain in ignorance but in other ways Nina taught her a surprising amount.

She was for ever harping upon men, upon the way a girl can play with a man, make a fool of him, flirt with him, land him. Proposals, she claimed, were amongst the most thrilling things of life, she had had dozens ; Cynthia admitted to only two.

"Never mind," Nina consoled, "you can really have a better time in that sort of way after you are married. You ask Clennel."

"I don't believe Clennel will agree," mused Cynthia.

"It is a rule he has always lived up to himself," retorted Nina.

Cynthia did not argue the point, nor did she pass the piece of wisdom on to Clennel, but most of the rest of Nina's teaching was aired for his benefit and at his expense, and he, more in love than was good for his temper, found the treatment very trying.

"It is undignified," he surprised her once by stating, "to flirt with a man who loves you, and whom you love, for God's sake don't play with me, Cynthia."

And for quite a whole day Cynthia had been sobered by the anger in his voice.

Of Mrs. Richardson Cynthia saw very little; apparently there were two camps in the house, one Mrs. Richardson's, one Nina's. They met for set meals, like dinner, but otherwise there was very little attempt at friendship between the two parties. Mrs. Richardson had her following, Nina hers, and Cynthia was among Nina's. She was a little in awe of Mrs. Richardson, and Clennel did not seem to suffer from an overwhelming affection for any of his family. He had been, Cynthia gathered, quixotically devoted to his father, and for many years before her husband's death Mrs. Richardson had not lived at home. That was where the split in the family lay for Nina too had stood for the father. There was no open fighting between the mother and her children, they just went their own ways, keeping up appearances by living in the same house.

Nina's party consisted largely, as Clennel had said it would, of Nina's young men; there were one or two

married women, and Mrs. Richardson's side of the house boasted of quite a number of girls. Cynthia knew them all by sight but very few of them even by name. They were a different class of being to any she had ever met before and she was a little shy of them. The day before Cynthia's visit was to end the combined house parties voted for a fancy-dress dance. Got up on the spur of the moment, every one to design and execute their own dresses from what was available in the house. It was not as difficult as it sounds, for Nina had a wealth of theatrical stuff stowed away in one of the upstairs rooms. A clamorous throng repaired there immediately after breakfast.

Cynthia found herself standing in the doorway with a member of the opposing camp, a little, inquisitive-eyed woman with bronze-coloured hair.

"You are Miss Weston, aren't you?" her companion asked. "We were all so interested in seeing the girl Captain Richardson was really going to marry, and it is very disappointing that Nina should have taken you up, it doesn't give the rest of us a chance."

"Everybody does seem surprised at Clennel's marrying," admitted Cynthia. "Was he a very grumpy woman hater?"

"Not exactly that, my dear," the red-haired woman smiled.

At that moment Nina sallied forth from the throng, cool and unruffled, holding aloft a diminutive garment all lace and frills.

"I have found just the thing for you, Cynthia," she

stated, "it is a Columbine, you'll look a fluffy lamb in it."

"There doesn't seem to be very much of it," Cynthia laughingly remonstrated.

The bronze-haired lady smiled again. "To-night we are taking the opportunity of showing our legs as well as our necks, aren't we, Miss Richardson?" she said.

Nina glanced at her, that is to say that she allowed her gaze for one second to rest on the topmost wave of bronze. "Those of us who have legs that can be shown," she retorted. "What are you coming as, Mrs. Dunn, a mermaid?"

"You haven't seen her legs, Cynthia," she explained afterwards; "the remark was absolutely called for. And in any case I hate the woman—jolly bad style on the mater's part asking her to the house this Christmas."

The two girls dressed together that evening in Nina's room, an apartment remarkable for the colour of its walls and carpet, both being an intense black, and for the quantity and variety of mirrors that adorned its walls and tables. Cynthia when she was at last dressed could see countless airy Columbines reflected on every side. Her wide starched skirt, with its multitude of flimsy lacey underskirts, swayed and fluttered as she moved, the little waist line, the tiny soft frilled bodice, the wreath of blue forget-me-nots in her hair, were all fascinating. Her legs were fascinating too, Nina and the maid informed her, but Cynthia was a little perturbed at the amount of them that was visible. For some

reason Mattie came into her head as she stood looking at this mirrored self, and the knowledge at the back of her heart was that Mattie would have disapproved. The thought was a trifle disconcerting, then she pushed it aside; just for to-night she was going to have a riotously exciting time in Nina's way—there was practically a compact between them to that effect.

Nina, quite regardless of public opinion or discretion, elected to appear for that evening as Cynthia's Harlequin. Her appearance was certainly electrifying, and caused even Mrs. Richardson an uncomfortable moment of surprise. With her heavy hair close wound to her head under the black skull cap, her slim body encased in all the glitter of scales and colour, she moved about the room, flicking her wand and pretending very assiduously that no one could guess who she was because of the tiny black mask concealing the top part of her face. As if her mouth, the vivid colour of her eyes, to say nothing of the fact that no other girl would have dared to appear in such a costume, was not enough to give her away from the very first. It made her look surprisingly young, that was the only thing to modify the informality of her appearance, that and the fact that she was so calmly indifferent to the effect her costume might produce.

Cynthia started her riotous evening of success badly by a furious row with Clennel. The man's temper had been badly strained once or twice in the past week, it broke into flame entirely at Cynthia's new tactics.

"I am not going to be engaged to you this evening,"

she announced firmly, after he had run her to earth with some difficulty in a dim corner of the drawing-room, and routed her previous partner by a fierce frown and very studied rudeness. "I am going to have a really good time, and if you are nice and polite to me I'll dance with you, once, perhaps." She smiled at him, her head a little on one side. Then she dropped him a diminutive curtsy and attempted to pass him.

"Wait a minute," threatened Clennel, "what is the idea, Cynthia? Do you want to make me mad to see what a brute I can be?—it is a damned silly game."

He held out his hands to her. Cynthia noted with a thrill of pleased excitement that they shook a little and his face was white—she was living up to Nina's teaching delightfully.

"Your language is horrible, Clen," she remonstrated, ignoring the hands, "and I don't know why you should get so tragic about things. Just for to-night," she tiptoed up to him and brought her lips on a level with his ear, "I am going to flirt with every man I dance with and I couldn't do that if I was engaged to you, could I?"

"Am I not to be flirted with?" asked Clennel, his voice suddenly hard and stern.

"Yes," nodded Cynthia, "that is part of the game." She stood away from him, watching him with laughing eyes.

"So be it," agreed Clennel. He took a step towards her and before she could move or had realized his intentions he had caught her to him roughly; she was power-

less in his arms, though she threw her head back and fought furiously, and his kisses were horrible, they hurt her more than just physically.

When the entrance of another couple at the far end of the room brought release she stood for a moment shaken out of her mood of light enjoyment. "You have been hateful," she whispered, "simply hateful. I hope you are satisfied now and will leave me alone for the rest of the evening." She turned to go, Clennel stepped in front of her, his eyes, which she refused to meet, imploring pardon.

"I am sorry, Cynthia," he said. "I was mad for a moment and lost my self-control. You have made it very hard for me sometimes just lately."

"It is a curious excuse," answered Cynthia coldly. "I fail to understand it."

With head held high and ridiculously flounced skirts, looking like a dignified baby, she swept past him.

Clennel did not come near her again and Cynthia was at liberty to carry out her intended campaign. It cannot be quite honestly said that she enjoyed it, for though she danced and flirted and laughed to her heart's content, she was conscious all the time of a vague sense of disappointment at the back of things. She saw Clennel twice during the evening, once in the library, which for the night had been turned into the refreshment room, drinking champagne with four other men and making a very considerable noise, and once when she and a partner unintentionally intruded upon a couple sitting very close and silent at a dark corner of the stairs. The man,

who did not even look up at them, was Clennel, the woman her bronze-haired acquaintance of the morning.

Cynthia's partner passed off what he described as a deuced awkward moment, with a laugh, and Cynthia, still according to him, "took it damned well," for she laughed too and made a great pretence of sneezing before they invaded the next sitting-out place.

One can, when driven to it, laugh quite naturally at things that do not in the least amuse one. Cynthia's laughter was of that description before the evening ended. There was far more champagne drunk by the various guests than was either necessary or good for them. No one seemed to resent it or to be in the very least surprised at a very intoxicated gentleman who held up the last dance by an insistent desire to shake hands with the bandmaster.

"For he's a jolly good fellow, that's why," he hic-coughed in explanation, and the rest of the dancers took up the cue till the room rang with the refrain, shouted and sung in every different key conceivable. Then there was an adjournment to a final supper, in the middle of which some very bright intellect turned all the lights out and the guests started yelling "I daren't go home in the dark," to the accompaniment of knife banging on their plates. Cynthia thought it all rather disgusting, when the man next her leant so near that she could feel his face brush against her own in the dark and knew that he was trying to kiss her, she stood up abruptly, thus giving his chin a jerk with her shoulder.

"I wish some one would turn the lights up again,"

she said in her clear girl's voice ; " it is so silly all being in the dark."

" Yes, come on, let's have the lights," another voice took up the cry, and at last after a good deal of shouting the order was carried out and the lights flared on again.

There was a general break-up of the party after that, sleepy-eyed servants watching their departure with relief, closing the windows and turning out the lights after them. Cynthia looked round for Nina to say good-night on the way to her own room, but the lithe figure, so conspicuous in its scales and glittering colours, had not been in evidence for some time, and Cynthia concluded she must have slipped away to bed earlier. She, herself, was dead tired and disappointed, the evening had not been the success she had planned, the close of it had been horrible ; some people might think it funny for men to get drunk, she knew it was hateful. Life at Dampness might be dull, at any rate it was clean and didn't leave you feeling ashamed. Almost before her hot face had had time to cool against the soft freshness of her pillow, however, she was asleep, more like a tired child than anything else, with strange fanciful dreams born of excitement stirring across her brain and keeping her restless.

For how long she had been asleep she did not know, but suddenly she was awake and staring into the darkness, terrified by the fact that some one was moving about her room. She could hear stealthy footsteps drawing near, and wild with panic at the knowledge

that a hand was feeling its way along the bed clothes, Cynthia sat up abruptly and screamed.

The hand had reached hers by then and closed on it. "For God's sake, don't scream, Cynthia," Clennel's voice whispered to her out of the darkness, "it is only me."

The fact was reassuring, Cynthia calmed her ruffled nerves as well as she could and drawing her hand away turned up the electric light that hung over her bed.

Clennel stood beside her, still in his ridiculous fancy dress of a cowboy, the white shirt opened at the throat, his hair and face looking as if he had just dipped them into a basin of water and rubbed them with a hard towel.

Cynthia, righteous indignation astir, glanced at him icily.

"You," she said, "what on earth are you doing, trying to frighten me like this?"

It was impossible to be very dignified under the circumstances for she felt she must look absurd, her hair all about her shoulders and a very unbecoming but strictly sensible flannel nightgown buttoned up to a neck band. Cynthia had once seen Nina's night attire and had ever since been dissatisfied with Mattie's choice.

Clennel did not appear to notice any of these disadvantages, his eyes were only hungry for her face, and for a second it seemed as if he could not answer her.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said finally, "I thought perhaps you would be awake. I wanted

to know if I was forgiven. You haven't kissed me to-night, Cynthia. I——" his voice broke off, his hand pulled restlessly at the edge of the blankets and still his eyes stayed on her face.

"Well, I am not going to kiss you, now," stated Cynthia; she pulled the bedclothes more firmly round her and sat up straight and stiff, "and you shouldn't come into my room like this at night, it isn't—well, nice," she concluded for want of a better word. "Anyway," she went on, melting a little before his evident contrition, "you don't deserve it, you have practically spoilt my evening, Clennel."

"Have I?" he asked. Suddenly he dropped on his knees by the bed, burying his head. "You are quite right, Cynthia," he muttered thickly, "I don't deserve it, I am a brute all through but I do love you, little girl, I do, I do."

It was just then that the door into the passage opened and Nina came into the room—her pink silk dressing-gown gathered round her as if she had put it on hurriedly, her hair in two long plaits, bare feet showing under the lace of her nightgown.

"What's up, Cynthia?" she asked. "Heard you yell out and thought——" Her eyes lit on Clennel, who had stumbled to his feet and her whole face suddenly hardened with suspicion. "Good Lord!" she said, "you—and——" Her eyes turned from him to Cynthia as if asking a question.

"I heard Cynthia scream too," put in Clennel quickly, "and looked in to see what had frightened her."

"Oh," remarked Nina, she smothered a yawn, "and she, I suppose, was hearing your prayers when I intruded." She pulled the silk frills of her pink dressing-gown more closely to her. "I must say I think it is pretty disgusting on your part, Clennel, considering all things."

She stood looking at him contemptuously, and the man's face flamed to deep scarlet and went white again.

"Damn your foul mind," he said. Cynthia caught her breath in horrified amazement, then he went over to the door between his room and Cynthia's and passed through, closing it behind him without again looking at either of them.

Nina watched his going with unblinking eyes, then she tripped over to the door and turning the key in the lock faced round on Cynthia with a little laugh.

"My dear girl," she remonstrated, "if you are going to be stupid enough to play this kind of game why be so idiotic as to scream. If any one else but me had heard you and taken the trouble to look in, it would have created a scandal hard to explain. And if——" something in Cynthia's air of rigid propriety, perhaps even the glimpse of that awe-inspiring nightgown of Mattie's choice, woke a doubt in her mind,—“if,” she repeated, “it wasn't your game at all, then the sooner you learn to lock your doors the better.”

"What do you mean?" begged Cynthia. "What does it all mean? what are you thinking?"

Acute suspicion woke in Nina. "If you really don't

know," she said, her hand on the door to depart, "I'll tell you—to-morrow. For to-night we have had enough excitements. Good-night, and—keep the door locked."

With which cryptic sentence she vanished, and Cynthia, definitely convinced that this was the most unpleasant evening of her life, lay down again and tried to woo back slumber.

CHAPTER VI

KNOWLEDGE

“**T**HAT,” said Nina, “is what marriage means.”

She sat on the edge of Cynthia's bed, looking cool and fresh after her morning bath, her dressing-gown open to the waist, showing the daintiest of under garments, all filmy lace and pink ribbons. She smelt sweet too, for her bath had been scented, and every morning when she stepped out of it and dried herself she powdered her body from top to toe with delicate fine, perfumed powder. Everything to do with the care and comfort of her body was exquisite with Nina ; it was only her mind that she kept unclean, and stored with nastiness.

Some of this she had been unfolding to Cynthia this morning, poor little crushed, for the moment almost broken-hearted, Cynthia, who lay facing her instructor, the colour wiped from her child-face, her eyes robbed of their youth and joy of living.

“Why do women bear it ? ” she asked dully.

Nina looked at her and laughed. To do her justice

she had not the slightest idea of how Cynthia was looking at the question. Nina had put the matter brutally, coarsely, because the mind shut in behind her beautiful body was coarse and evil. She claimed for herself that her outlook on things was natural and unashamed. But Nature is not evil; it is men and women who make out of nature vice unbelievable. The knowledge that Nina was so proud of was not the truth of unashamed Nature, it was the horrible low gleanings of vice, of things learned in secret and spoken of in whispers by people who move about the world like poisonous germs, infecting all they come in contact with.

"It is not a question of bearing it," she answered now. "Some women like it. Why, some men——"

Cynthia saw a prospect of more horrors before her and moved hastily. "Please don't tell me any more," she begged. "I feel as if I never wanted to know anything again." She got out of bed and moved across to the window, her unbecoming garment clinging to her in stiff lines. "It isn't as nice a world as I thought it was," she whispered half to herself.

"My dear," remonstrated Nina from her perch on the bed, "looked at properly it is amusing, which is more to the point. And as for knowledge—well supposing you had married Clennel without knowing, a bit of a shock that would have been, wouldn't it?"

Cynthia shivered. Clennel, to her present warped vision, was assuming dreadful proportions; the very memory of his kisses filled her with a shame that was almost agony. If what Nina said was really true, what

had lain behind his love-making that she had been so proud of? If this was what man's love, that she had so long dreamt and idealized about, meant—if—suddenly wild hope leapt to life in Cynthia's heart. It might not be true. She would wait, would make no judgment until she had seen Mattie and asked Mattie for the truth.

She turned from the window. "I am going to have my bath now, Nina," she said, "and catch the earliest train back home I can. Will you help me not to see Clennel before I go? I couldn't somehow face him, and you can explain—say I am not awfully fit, or something."

"I'll tell him off over last night," Nina agreed, "and make him hide a diminished head for a bit; but you aren't going to break things off, are you? Getting married is all in the day's work, old girl."

"I don't know," admitted Cynthia. "I must get away; I must think things out for myself. You will help me, won't you, Nina?"

"Of course I will,"—Nina slipped off the bed and collected her stray belongings—"and you will probably feel all right about it to-morrow. Clennel will be a tiresome husband so long as he is in love, but he gets over his attacks very quickly."

Clennel, whom she found later on in the morning, sulky and miserable, waiting for Cynthia in the dining-room, she duly told off as she had said she would. He gathered from her remarks that Cynthia was too deeply offended to wish to see him that day, and that she would

write to him from Dampness when she reached there.

"It's your fault, if she is all that," he expostulated fiercely; "you have been giving her some of your damned views."

But he was sufficiently ashamed of himself not to ignore Cynthia's reported wishes. So Cynthia, avoiding detection and saying good-bye to no one but Mrs. Richardson and Nina, who drove her to the station, made her escape.

In the train that was bearing her back to Dampness and Mattie she gathered heart almost to believe that Nina's statements must have been dreadfully exaggerated if not most of them false; they could not be entirely dislodged, however, and Cynthia was ill at ease, acutely conscious that the truth must be investigated as soon as possible. She waited, pushed to silence by sheer nervousness, until the second day of her return before disburdening her heart to Mattie, then she chose their own particular time, when, with the babies in bed, and Major Redwood at work in the study, Mattie and she had the drawing-room uninterruptedly to themselves.

"Is it true, Mattie," she asked at the end of the telling, "that is all I want to know?—is it true? Oh, if it is," she went on impetuously, for Mattie's strange silence was bringing despair to her heart and she stood up, "just say so quickly, Mattie, say yes or no, I shall understand why you can't talk of it."

"It can't be answered like that, dear," Mattie spoke slowly; she knew full well the dangerous path her feet were on, and she wanted time to choose her words well.

"Because most of what you have heard is so hatefully evil, and yet behind it lies the grain of truth. Life is different to what we dream and plan and hope, marriage is a mystery we cannot talk of or explain in any way. That side of it, the idea that you are facing with such horror now, Cynthia, counts for so very little to most women—if you love the man."

"But is that love?" asked Cynthia, her face rigid.

Mattie struggled with the truth and voiced it as it appeared to her. "No," she admitted; "not love, at least as I know it. Love means so much more, it means just everything in the world. Passion," she paused a little over the word, "and love go together, but passion is not love."

"Then behind all men's love," argued Cynthia, "there is something hideous and horrible."

"No," said Mattie again. She stood up and put her hands on Cynthia. "That is not true either. Oh, don't think, little sister, that I don't understand how you feel; I too have faced that fright when my dreams failed me. But it is not hideous or horrible. I can't explain; when you have learnt to really love you will understand."

"No," answered Cynthia, and passionate resentment rang in her voice, "I shall never understand. You have brought me up on lies, lies—why have you done it, why?" Her eyes, accusing and angry, fell before the hurt look in Mattie's. "Lies about love," she went on hurriedly, "about the beauty and wonder of it; and all

the time," her voice broke, "oh, Mattie, why do you live like that, how do you bear it?"

"You are looking at it from such a wrong point of view," begged Mattie. "There is nothing in it to hurt one or make one ashamed. Won't you trust me, dear? If the idea is so terrible to you it must be because you don't love Captain Richardson. Put it aside, don't marry just yet, wait till the right man comes along; he will be able to straighten this out for you as not even I with all my love can do."

"I shall never marry," answered Cynthia. She had suddenly grown very quiet and she moved from Mattie over to the door. "I am sorry if I have been rude, Mattie," her voice was studiously polite, "but all this has been rather a shock to me. I shall never marry," she repeated, and the hurt child came to the surface again. "Life is hateful, hateful," she whispered, and went out banging the door to behind her.

Tragedy may have lain, probably did lie, in Cynthia's heart, but her behaviour for the next four months was that of a spoilt and sulky child. She nursed what appeared to be a secret grudge against Mattie, and in some curious way, because Cynthia found stubborn occasion to hold her in the wrong, Mattie herself laid all the blame at her own door. It was her fault, she told herself over and over again, her fault, for not having faced the problem of telling Cynthia sooner. There were days when Mattie felt as if she had failed in her promise to the dead mother whom she had so dearly

loved, and the thought brought almost anguish to her heart.

Cynthia wrote Clennel the day after her interview with Mattie, and first she took his photograph from where it stood on the little table by her bed and laid it face downwards in the bottom drawer of her cupboard. Clennel had lied to her too, in word and act and look; she could find nothing in her heart for him but shrinking horror.

"Dear Clennel," she wrote, even under the circumstances 'Captain Richardson' would have been absurd, "I am writing to break off our engagement. I cannot marry you; please do not think I shall ever change my mind. I cannot give you any reason, it is just that I know I do not love you. I would rather you did not come down here or even write to me, and I will get my brother-in-law to pack up your ring for you to-morrow and send it back. I am sorry if this letter hurts you, it is impossible for me to write anything else."

Black rage took Clennel by the throat as he read; if Nina had been in the room he would have killed her first and thought about it afterwards. He had absolutely no doubt but that Nina had stuffed up Cynthia with some kind of horrible tale, and if Cynthia had repeated it to the Redwoods his chances of ever seeing her again would be small. But, however small, he must take them. Cynthia had loved him, he was convinced of that.

He went to Dampness forthwith and was received by Mattie in the drawing-room—Mattie who had never

liked the man, but who was sorry for him notwithstanding.

"Cynthia won't even see you," she told him. "I have tried to persuade her; I think she owes it to you, but she is stubborn. I have never been able to make Cynthia do what she did not wish to do."

"But why, what is it all about?" asked Clennel. He walked restlessly about the room and Mattie stood by the fire watching him. "It has been a bolt from the blue, Mrs. Redwood. I give you my word,"—he turned to face her—"I had no idea it was coming. It has hit me pretty badly," he said, and dropped into a chair, hiding his face in his hands.

Mattie moved over to him impulsively, she could not bear to see any one hurt.

"I know," she said; "I am most dreadfully sorry for you. We, my husband and I, never liked the wedding. Cynthia is so young, so changeable. But I would not have had this happen for anything. She is hurting you, she is hurting all of us, she is hurting, perhaps, herself most of all."

"Then you think she still loves me," asked Clennel. He lifted his head to look at her.

"No," answered Mattie, "no, it is better you should understand that at once. She has never loved you, she only thought she did, there is nothing in her heart that you could touch or reach."

"I don't believe you," said Clennel hoarsely. He stood up. "Cynthia did love me, I would have staked my eternity on that. You are lying to me because

you want to keep me from her. No, I apologize for that," he corrected hastily. "I ought not to have said it. But you are mistaken, Mrs. Redwood, I know she loved me."

"Love doesn't change like that, in a breath," Mattie answered. "If I thought she loved you, I would tell it you here and now."

It was all the comfort he could get, and, not wishing to make himself absolutely ridiculous, he had to leave it there. Major Redwood, out of a mistaken sense of politeness, insisted on accompanying the guest to the railway station. So often does tragedy verge on comedy, for Major Redwood being polite to some one he heartily disliked was the very essence of comedy.

It is to be doubted that, even if Clennell had been firm in his efforts to overcome her resistance, Cynthia would have given in to him. As it was, he did not, after that first effort, make any further attempt. He wrote one letter, full of passionate appeal, which remained unanswered, and then pride came to his aid; he had never had to beg favours from women; he would not beg twice even to Cynthia. He cut her rigidly out of his life after that, the one good influence that had ever entered it, and went back to Malta with a devil of hurt pride and crushed love in his heart. The combined effect was not good for his character. Stories were afloat about him before the year was out that must have made the Redwoods devoutly grateful that he was not their brother-in-law.

"For that matter though," Major Redwood irritably

remarked when they were discussing the question one day, "it would do your sister a lot of good to marry a man who would smack her. It is what she wants; wish she was a bit younger and I would do it myself. Lot of tommy rot taking up an attitude like this about men, and treating you and me as if we were immoral. I'll tell you one thing, Mattie,"—his good-natured face assumed a severe scowl—"I don't think I am going to stand it much longer; I'll take her in hand myself shortly."

"Oh no, Jimmie, please not that," begged Mattie. No one except herself understood Major Redwood's effort to improve them. "But she is rude to you. I can make nothing of her, she doesn't seem even to like us any more."

"She is a damned ungrateful chit," exploded Major Redwood. Had he not seen the hurt wonder in Mattie's eyes time and again at Cynthia's conduct. "What she wants is a man, and one, I repeat, who will smack her at that."

But the mother heart in Mattie realized only that her one ewe lamb had gone sadly astray. What mattered it that ninety and nine should be safe in the fold? The hunger of her love cried for the one outside, and the world, because of the shadow between herself and Cynthia, seemed sadly out of joint.

CHAPTER VII

BROTHERLY COUNCIL

FRANK WESTON, the Westons' only brother, fat a trifle pompous, yet, withal, jovial, type of the men who for over a century have been turned out by the Universities to govern and rule and lead in the right path our peoples in the far East, arrived in England towards the end of May and came straight down to spend the first month of his leave with the Redwoods. Incidentally he wished to inspect his youngest sister, Cynthia, who had had the temerity to break off her engagement to a really wealthy and suitable male. Frank Weston had only one idea and ideal for womankind—that of wife and mother. His opinions, for instance, on the subject of suffragettes were sweeping and instantaneous.

“Give them each a man and let that said man see that they have a baby, and there will be no more talk of votes.”

Perhaps long sojourn in the East had led him to adopt this Eastern view of women, for another favourite precept of his was : “If England is to be saved from the

disgrace that these wild unoccupied women are bringing on her, polygamy must come into fashion again ; women must be secluded under a harem system."

It was opinions of this sort, voiced with a pompous disregard of there being any other view possible or sensible, that roused, in Cynthia at least, flaming indignation. She had known very little of her brother up till then, as his life's work had taken him abroad even before she had left the nursery, but her memories of him had always been as of some large noisy bully, who was forever pulling her hair and laughing at her righteous indignation. He had always had a laugh that filled whatever room he might be in, only now it was turned against something that Cynthia was beginning to know as a Cause, too holy and just for any one's laughter—the Freedom of Women.

Redwood and his brother-in-law had, until this visit, found very little in common with each other. They belonged, for one thing, to professions that have never succeeded in amalgamating, despite the many battles they have fought, in India especially, standing shoulder to shoulder. To the heaven-born civilian of India the soldier has always remained an ununderstandable, unappreciated quantity. On this occasion, however, Redwood and Weston undoubtedly fraternized, and Frank learned before he had been in the house a week all about what Major Redwood described as Cynthia's notions.

With this information behind him, he tackled Mattie on the following day. Mattie was four years older than

Frank, but that did not prevent him from addressing her in exactly the same half-bantering tone that he adopted towards Cynthia. As has been remarked, Frank Weston's views on women were limited, he never made the mistake of treating them as intellectual equals.

"What is all this about Cynthia?" he asked. "Why was the engagement broken off? It sounded a most suitable arrangement."

Mattie looked up at him. Not for a moment did she propose to try and explain to her brother all the difficulties of the situation, only just for one second and before tackling it at all she wanted to know if, in this finished product of Cambridge and the Indian Civil Service, she could trace any resemblance to the brother she had known as baby and boy. Her eyes fell away from the search unsatisfied, and she answered meekly,—

"Cynthia didn't love him. Besides," she flushed a little as she bent over her work, "there is no hurry about her marrying, Frank; she is very, very young."

"I daresay," agreed her brother. "Still, it was a pity not to get her settled. It will be a weight off our minds when she is satisfactorily married."

"Happily married," corrected Mattie gently.

"My dear girl, it is the same thing," retorted her brother. "If you marry a girl young enough to a suitable man, properly selected, of course she will be happy. Witness your own case; you don't attempt to argue that you were passionately in love when you married."

"Perhaps not," answered Mattie.

"Well, and what about now?" Weston laughed, as

if humouring a fractious argumentative child. "I gather you are a fairly satisfactory wife, and you don't look unhappy."

"I have been, and am, more happy than I can say," Mattie acknowledged. "If I had been sure that marriage with Capt. Richardson would have brought the same happiness to Cynthia, I would have tried to persuade her. But I wasn't sure,"—she lifted her head and glanced out at the garden, where the youngest Redwood, under the watchful eyes of a devoted nurse, was learning to walk. Would happiness for Cynthia lie in the possession of such an outlook? Would babies take the place in the long run of all the most wonderful dreams in the world? That was the question. "He wasn't a good man," she went on, turning to her brother again, "at least, perhaps I have no right to judge, for instinctively I never liked him. Besides, I could do nothing, in any case; Cynthia made up her mind without asking me."

"That is exactly it," agreed Weston. "It appears to me that Cynthia does very little consulting of anything except her own feelings. You have spoilt her, Mattie, that is about it."

"I suppose I have," Mattie agreed. "I wanted so much that she should be happy, that she should have the same good times to look back on that you and I have, Frank. I tried to fill every place in her life with happiness, so that she should never miss the love that had to go out of her life when father and mother died."

Frank shifted his feet, his face assuming the blank expression habitually adopted by some men when their

women-kind become sentimental. He had a well ingrained and thoroughly encouraged dislike for anything that approached depth of feeling; almost unknowingly it struck him as undignified, certainly unmanly.

"Yes, I quite see," he agreed hastily as soon as he could get a word in, "and I am sure you have succeeded. The question now is, what is the next best move. You and Redwood go abroad, don't you, at the end of this year."

"We believe so," answered Mattie. There was none of her old playfellow left; why had she tried to find him?

"Well, my proposal is that I should take my turn at Cynthia." She had known it was coming, but how cold the words struck on Mattie's heart. "I'll take her back to India with me in August, and I guarantee to find her a choice of husbands in the first season. She will enjoy the life, and with crowds of young men to fetch and carry for her and to make love to her, these suffragette notions will soon vanish, you mark my words."

He paused, and silence fell on the room, except for the clicking of Mattie's knitting needles. "What do you think of the idea?" he asked at last.

"Will you ask Cynthia first?" said Mattie. She stood up; Cynthia's voice could be heard in the hall asking for every one's whereabouts. "I shall hate to part with her, but that is probably selfishness. Once or twice lately it has struck me that she is not happy with us any more. We cannot keep even the smallest of them babies for ever." There was an odd break in her voice and she turned away again abruptly to the window.

Weston asked Cynthia. He undoubtedly did it on an unfortunate day and in a mistaken manner. He had that morning at lunch held forth in his most dictatorial fashion on the subject of women and women's rights. Perhaps because the day's paper had been full of accounts of hunger strikes and window-smashing ladies, perhaps because he was blissfully under the impression that thus he paved the way to his talk with Cynthia.

"All these surplus women," he said, "require to be deported either to the colonies or to a desert island—soon bring them to their senses—lack of men. Of course, it is hard lines on them that there is such a shortage of men in England these days; that is the real problem, and that is what makes me say, send them to the colonies, for preference, where there are men actually wanting wives."

"Perhaps some of us don't want husbands," put in Cynthia.

"Don't know what is good for you then," laughed her brother good-humouredly. "Woman's place in nature is to be a wife and mother. Lot of rot talked about woman's work for the nation; only good thing they can really do for the State is to provide it with sons."

After a lunch punctuated with remarks of this sort, he and Cynthia went for a walk together across the golf-course down to the sea wall.

"What do you say to coming back to India with me, young lady?" he asked when they had reached the same sea wall and after a rather silent interval had held them.

Cynthia faced him ; all the way across the golf-course her mind had been seething with indignation. In her eyes, for the moment, her brother had taken on all the most evil characteristics of the sex she was on the verge of hating.

"Are you going to find a husband for me ?" she asked. He was quite incapable of reading the depth of her scorn.

"Probably," he admitted ; then he laughed and patted her on the shoulder, "if you don't find one for yourself, that is to say. You will have a good time choosing, Cynthia." He was honestly rather pleased with her for being nice to look at.

"I don't mean ever to marry," stated Cynthia firmly.

"What are you going to do ?" asked Weston still humorously. He sat himself down on the stone wall and produced a pipe from his pocket.

"If, as you and all other men try to pretend," retorted Cynthia, her head up, fierce colour in her cheeks, "there are only two ways open to women—either to be the mothers of your children, or the bad women of the streets—I will be a bad woman but I will never, never marry."

The tobacco spilt from Weston's pouch owing to the fact that he held it upside down unwittingly. He was so genuinely shocked that for the second it had the same effect as a violent blow on the chest would have had ; his face matched Cynthia's in colour.

"What on earth do you mean by making statements of that sort ?" he asked finally.

Cynthia's anger had a little cooled; letting off steam is a valuable help in moments of intense rage.

"I suppose you are the kind of man,"—her young eyes swept over him scornfully,—"who would think it disgusting for women to know or speak the truth about life. Oh, I can quite understand why you want to keep us blindfolded, innocent, I suppose you would call it, until you have trapped us into marriage, because otherwise there would be so many of us who wouldn't marry. Unfortunately, the bandage has slipped from my eyes just a little too soon."

Weston replaced his pipe and what was left of the tobacco in his pocket. This was no time for smoking; cool judgment and tact were called for.

"Look here, Cynthia," he said, his voice weighted with brotherly admonition, "you are talking like a damned little fool, and about subjects you ought not even to be thinking of. Where on earth you can have picked up such ideas passes my comprehension, but if you take my advice you won't air them again. To your inexperience they may sound delightfully wicked; as a matter of fact, they are the worst kind of drivel that I have ever heard. Now, let us put all that aside and talk sense. If you are not going to marry, what are you going to do? You cannot go on living with Mattie for ever."

"I can work, if Mattie is tired of having me" answered Cynthia, head still high in the air.

"It is not a question of Mattie," put in her brother ponderously, "and what she feels about you. Mattie

has a husband and children of her own, having selected a life,"—he could not resist the dig,—“which you appear to think degrading. There may come a day when Redwood will think quite rightly that he would like to have his wife and family to himself. You have lived with them now for a good many years. Well, now, can't you see for yourself how much better it would be for you to take unto yourself”—he was trying to win back to a spirit of good-natured chaff—“a husband and a home? Come out to India with me; see life; put aside these absurd notions. You know, Cynthia, the world has positively been run, ever since it first began, on these so-called degrading lines.” The argument was practically over he concluded, and he stood up, putting a kindly hand on her shoulder. “That is settled, then; we will have a top hole time together, you wait and see.”

“I would rather work,”—Cynthia spoke stiffly and she moved away from him. “I shall never think the same as you do; there would be no use my going to India with you; I should know all the time that you were waiting for me to marry, and I cannot marry. It isn't any use. You say women have no right to think—at least, that is what your views amount to—I suppose you do not attempt to prevent them feeling. I feel I cannot marry.”

Weston regarded her angrily; she was really singularly irritating—women were ridiculously stupid at times.

“You won't come with me, you are going to have the decency to leave the Redwoods in peace, I presume; there is only one other path open to you. You shall go to London and work, it may teach you sense. I will

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allow you sufficient money to keep you out of difficulties, and make no other effort to interfere with you."

"I shall not require your money," Cynthia retorted. "I can earn what I shall require."

"I am rapidly coming to the conclusion that you are a raving lunatic," answered Weston. "On this subject, at least, I refuse to argue with you. The allowance I shall make is practically yours by right. The family money went to educate me. When father was dying he wrote asking me to promise to provide for you and Mattie and mother so long as any of you should need it, and I promised to myself, if not to him. You may be mad, but you are still my sister. I shall pay the lunatic asylum's fees when that is necessary."

They walked back in silence—Weston sucking by this time, at his pipe, and pondering over the vagaries of females—Cynthia with burning cheeks and a wild impulse to weep in her heart. She had taken her first step towards freedom; the courage in her veins seemed frozen at the prospect.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLEA OF YOUTH

SUCH little things can happen in life, little unimportant events such as laughter in the wrong place, anger where we looked to find sympathy, and the whole course and plan of the years is changed. At the end of things we look back, it is to be presumed, and note how here great storms, there impassable obstacles, had blocked our way, so that it seemed as if no other path was open to us save to climb their arduous heights or circumvent their great depths. It has taken us years, nay, sometimes, all our lives, and wasted all our strength to win past them. What caused them? Just the reckless hand of Providence, that, regardless whether we win or lose, watches our pitiful efforts with unchangeable mind? Or, more likely theory, are they brought about by unnoticed incidents in our everyday life, little events that passed unheeded into the deeps of yesterday, yet left such giant powers astir against us?

That short half-hour, spent with her brother on the wall overlooking the sea at Dampness, changed once

and forever the even tenor of Cynthia Weston's life. If their conversation had veered differently, perhaps even if Weston had not laughed and Cynthia had not lost her temper, none of all that follows in this story would have taken place. Cynthia would have gone to India; in three months—with the subject undiscussed and unquestioned—she would have forgotten or overgrown her disproportionate view upon life; she would have married, and, as in the plot of the old-fashioned three volume novel, marriage would have ended her life story. It is right that it should; a married woman has no story of her own to tell the world; her history is bound up in those other little lives she gives to life.

As it was, with only a sense of splendid martyrdom—since no one loved her sufficiently to wish to understand her—and, but poorly supplied for the storms and deep waters in front of her, Cynthia pushed off the small cockle shell of self into the ocean of life alone. That is put romantically; in plainer language, almost before she realized that such was her choice, Cynthia found herself established in a select boarding-house in a deserted side street off Earl's Court, run by a kindly old woman for the express purpose of providing rooms—and food of a sort—at moderate rates for young girls employed in one way or another professionally. Frank Weston had settled it all; Cynthia and Mattie never even talked it over. "Mattie does not wish me to stay," was Cynthia's outlook. "Cynthia does not mind what she does so long as she gets away from me and the babies," Mattie's. Indeed, though strongly urged by all her

love for Cynthia, what arguments could Mattie put forth? And yet, how her heart ached, how her brain clamoured, to find some other way than this for her treasured darling.

Frank was quite impervious to arguments and quite good-humouredly pleased with the idea that life on her own for a bit would teach Cynthia sense.

"I will bet my last rupee," he said, "that at the end of six months she will write and suggest coming out to me. Don't you worry, Mattie, the passage money is put aside all ready."

Not worry; it seemed to Mattie as if the cloud of wonderment and incessant worrying would never lift from her brain again.

"The moment you are tired of it, the first second you want me and could really put up with us again," she begged, clinging to Cynthia at the last, trying to sweep aside the shadow that stood between them, "send for me, Cynthia. I'll come to you, if I can, even from the other side of the world."

But Cynthia refused to be moved from her chill aloofness. She was hurt herself at the position to which her own obstinacy had brought her, and so much occupied with her own hurt that she had no time to notice Mattie's.

"I shall be quite all right," she answered stiffly. "Frank has been very generous about the allowance."

"It wasn't money or want of money I was thinking of," persisted Mattie. She sat on the one chair which Cynthia's bedroom in the new abode boasted of. The room was sparingly furnished and drab in its orna-

mentations; the one small window looked out over a sea of innumerable chimney pots, a raw yellow fog held the world outside. "It is the loneliness I am afraid of for you, the loneliness and ugliness of just all this." She indicated with a wave of her hand their surroundings. "I can't bear to leave you here. Give it up, dear, come back to us. You may not always get on with Jimmie, but at the back of his badly expressed heart he is fond of you. You are our oldest baby, none of the others have ever taken your place."

"I can't give up the life I have chosen," answered Cynthia. Mattie could not even gather that she had been touched by the pleading. "I have put my hand to the plough, Mattie; I won't turn back, not till I am beaten."

What she really meant was—"I'll show Frank he is wrong about women."

Either way she was adamant; arguments against such an outlook were useless. With what amounted almost to despair, Mattie packed up her household gods and effects—Major Redwood having been ordered to India—and said good-bye to Cynthia in one last painfully speechless interview. They sailed, the whole family, including two nurses, from Tilbury on November 14, Frank Weston having taken his departure two mails earlier, and Cynthia, driving back from Fenchurch Street station whither she had gone to see them off, knew that she had definitely started on the making of her life alone.

To begin with she made few friends, though she was from the first passionately eager to find a girl pal. There were twelve young ladies in the boarding-house—

ladies, Cynthia decided, was a word that covered a multitude of classes. Her twelve companions were lady-like, horribly so in deportment and table manners, but they lacked in some sort of way the bond of breeding which would have made friendship with any of them possible. Where they failed more than anywhere was in their idea of humour—their laughter was a perpetual source of wonder to Cynthia. What did they find so refreshingly humorous in each other's conversation? She earned for herself, she was to learn afterwards, a reputation for overweening conceit and stuck-upness; her arrival at meals, or her very rare visits to the sitting-room, caused a chill to fall over the gathering. The girls had an irritating habit of whispering their humour to each other if she was in the room, and of giggling instead of laughing. More and more she drew away from them and took to spending all her evenings in her own room, till all pretence at friendship between them dropped. For work she had selected a secretarial training as likely to prove the most useful, and every day from nine to six she attended a school for shorthand and typewriting, applying herself studiously to a task which, from the very first, she hated. There, too, though surrounded by girls of her own age and more or less her own class, she failed to make any particular friendships, though she undoubtedly got on better with them in their joint work than she did with her house mates.

How quickly her own social friends were to drop away from her she was not long in learning. Nina married the

winter after Cynthia started life in London, and any slight bond that had been between them snapped from that moment. For the rest, her old world was not the same as her new one; she dropped out of things; one must make one's friends and life among the people one lives and works with, one cannot hunt with the hounds and run with the hare. Now and again a bachelor friend, a stray subaltern of the Dampness days, would meet her by chance in the streets and would insist on learning her address and getting up a dinner party and seats at the theatre in her honour. But always Cynthia came through such festivities with a vow that she would never indulge in them again. There were weeks at a time, after an occasion of that sort, when her surroundings and work would drive her to the verge of horrible despair, and she would sob into her pillow at nights that she was an outcast, that her own world knew her no longer, that she was degraded in their eyes. A favourite quotation with her in those days was, "My feet have been in the stocks and the iron has entered into my soul."

It was all a great deal of fuss about nothing, but Cynthia was young enough to feel that the particular pin prick of the moment was as tragic as the whole world's woe.

She had been at Mrs. Broad's establishment three months when Elsie Hart first dawned on her horizon. Cynthia saw the new arrival at dinner, a fair-haired, eager-faced girl, with a chin that thrust forward her face in a perpetual questioning of life. This intense eagerness went, curiously enough, hand in hand with boredom. She

was, on that first evening, so obviously bored with her surroundings, so visibly scornful of her companions, that Cynthia was moved to an instinctive sympathy and understanding. After dinner, cold, unpalatable dinner, that was daily getting more difficult to eat, quite against her usual custom, Cynthia invaded the sitting-room.

The new girl was sitting at the centre table, her long, boyish figure practically spread out over it, writing letters. Cynthia, under a battery of curious eyes and suppressed giggles from the other occupants, took the chair opposite and produced her own writing-case.

"Have you got any blotting paper you could lend me?" she asked presently, glad to have found a suitable opening for talk.

The other girl raised her head, "bother" written very clearly across her expressive features. "You can have a bit of mine," she said shortly. "I would rather tear it in half than pass it backwards and forwards all the time."

It was not a propitious start. Cynthia withdrew into her shell and back to her bedroom. For several days the friendship got no further, then one evening, as Cynthia was making her way along the dimly-lit passage to her room, she passed Mrs. Broad bearing a cup of thick gruel—inevitable sign denoting illness in one of the household.

"Got an invalid, Mrs. Broad?" she asked, pausing at her door.

"Yes," the worthy woman answered, "and a very troublesome one, won't eat a thing I take her. It is the

new girl, Miss Hart, next room to yours." She nodded her head ponderously in the direction of the next door and passed on her way.

Cynthia paused undecided, then on an impulse she went up to the door and knocked.

"Oh, come in," a fretful voice invited her, and Cynthia, pushing the door open, entered.

Elsie Hart, looking more like a boy than ever, her hair in a pig-tail and brushed off her face, her figure encased in bright pink pyjamas, sat disconsolately on the edge of the bed. The room was gloriously untidy, the window wide open, despite the fact that it was distinctly cold and that there was no method of heating the top floor rooms in Mrs. Broad's establishment.

Elsie appeared more relieved than surprised at her visitor.

"It's you, is it?" she said. She turned sideways into bed and pulled the blankets over her. "I thought it was that damned old fool again. I have been sick, and she is trying to stuff me with the most disgusting mixtures—chocolate is the last idea. I shall be really ill,"—her eyes showed despair—"if she brings anything like chocolate in here."

"I should think you would catch a cold in this atmosphere," Cynthia remonstrated; instinctively she was already tidying the room. "What has been wrong with you?"

"Mother Broad's food, I expect," Elsie answered. "I say, don't bother about those things, I am quite used to living in a pig-stye."

"It is pretty bad here," agreed Cynthia. Suddenly the desire for self-expression came on her; she looked across at the other girl and their eyes met. "You feel about it as I do, don't you? It is all new to you, too,"—to her own surprise her voice shook on the words a little,—"and it is hateful, isn't it?"

Elsie's eyes held hers with steady understanding, then she looked round the room and out of the open window. "You mean—hate all this?" she asked. She stuck out her chin aggressively. "It's hellish!"

She said it so calmly that for a second Cynthia forgot to be shocked at the words, and even then the laugh that followed was infectious, and she had to sit down on the edge of the bed and join in.

"It was such a gloriously vivid way of expressing it," she explained a week or two afterwards; the two girls, by now close companions, were spending the evening in Cynthia's room. "I had been putting up with it for three months and inwardly grouching all the time but I never thought of dragging up language like that to apply to it."

"It helps one, doesn't it?" admitted Elsie. She occupied the bed and was industriously puffing at a cigarette, an achievement which filled Cynthia with admiration. "I thought of it first, at least I must have heard some disreputable old gardener use it in the first instance, but it came aptly to my lips for the first time, I mean, on an occasion when I got out of bed in the dark, and stubbed my toe on a chair leg. I have used it ever since to express things that make my soul boil over and where all

decent language fails me. It is getting very hackneyed here."

"I don't think things are so bad, now that I have found you," Cynthia meditated. "What I was really longing for was some one to talk to; I have never been silent for three months before."

Elsie nodded. "Yes, I like talking too," she admitted, "but that doesn't amount to a quarter of what I want." She sat up in bed, the cigarette disregarded, her face eager and aggressive. "I want life, and a good time, and money and nice clothes, and men, nice men—not dreadful creatures who are either clerks or shop-walkers, but men." She lay back with a little sigh, the life wiped from her face. "Do you know," she said, "I can't bear to see the days go past, as they do, when they bring me nothing that I want, because every day brings old age nearer, and old age is hateful and ridiculous. Besides, one can't enjoy oneself when one is old." She threw herself back on the bed dramatically and spread out her arms, staring up at the ceiling. "I want joy," she said, a certain passionate intensity robbing the words and action of ridiculousness, "I want joy and life."

Cynthia stared at her, a puzzled frown on her face.

"I want all those kind of things, too," she acknowledged, "though I don't suppose I am as hungry for a good time as you are, because I have had mine; but why men?"

"Why men!" repeated Elsie. She sat up with a jerk. "Good gracious, West," it was Elsie's invariable custom

to call all girls by the first half of their surname, "what an absurd question, and from you too, who must have known men. Whereas I, well at home, there was only dad and the gardener, not even a stray curate. I have never had an opportunity of knowing, but I am quite sure I should like to have three or four men passionately in love with me."

"Do you know what it all means?" asked Cynthia, her eyes lowered, her face a little pink. It was the first time the subject had come up between them, though everything else on earth had been discussed.

Elsie studied the blush for a minute or two half quizzically, then she threw back her head and laughed. "What a ridiculously tragic way to put it," she said; "like the small boy in *Punch*, my reply is: 'Garn, mother, I have kept rabbits.' Of course I know; there aren't many girls who don't, nowadays."

"I didn't," answered Cynthia. She lifted her head and looked out of the window; even now she could hardly speak calmly of that time. "When I heard about it first, I was engaged; we were to have been married last May. Oh, Elsie, how can you laugh about it, treat it as a joke? For me it darkened just everything, it was as if a great cloud came between me and all the beauty I had dreamt was in the world—it was hideous, hideous."

She covered her eyes with her hands as if even at that moment they were facing something awful. Elsie's voice, calm and unruffled, broke the intense moment.

"I think that is the most unhealthy view of life I have ever heard," she stated. Cynthia dropped her hands

and stared with amazement. "Besides, what is all the fuss about it?—you don't even know what this self-same cloud consists of."

"But I do," asserted Cynthia. She put her horror behind her and faced the question bravely. "I found out. Another girl told me, to start with; then I went with what I had heard to Mattie and I asked her if it was true, and I saw the truth more in her face than in what she answered, because of course she tried to smooth things over. But——"

"Words, all words and imagination," Elsie interrupted. "Things like that can't be put into words. You might as well try to explain Death, or God. Oh, I don't want to shock you, West, but I should like to shake you, you have taken up such a ridiculous position."

She swung her legs off the bed on to the floor. "Besides," she went on, "it is outside what I was talking about for the moment. I allude to nice men and having a good time and you promptly plunge into one of the mysteries of life with a pink face and scared eyes. What happened, anyway, about your engagement?"

"I broke it off," acknowledged Cynthia. For the first time since her interview with Nina, she had a feeling that perhaps she had been ridiculous.

"Because of what you had heard?" continued Elsie, curiosity the predominant note in her voice.

Cynthia nodded. "Yes," she said, "and because suddenly his kisses, the idea of his touching me, holding me, had become repulsive. I didn't ever want to see him again."

"Must have been because you didn't really love him," Elsie argued wisely, "and your initial instinct was just looking for a chance to say so."

"I didn't feel like that before I heard," objected Cynthia.

"Possibly not; but if you had loved him do you think anything would have counted?" Elsie stood up abruptly and moved over to the glass. "I wonder if any one will ever love me," she pondered, studying her face. "Love is one of the things I want most, one reads about it, and hears about it, and talks about it; would it be fair to make one go through life without feeling it? I want love," she swept round suddenly on Cynthia, "not calm, placid, stay-at-home affection for a man and children, which is what marriage amounts to, but that other love which has been at the bottom of all the great deeds of the world, something that will carry me right off my feet and make me feel things. I don't mind what happens to me afterwards, if I can once feel that. That is what I am up here for," she went on more calmly, "to find life and live it before I grow old. Of course I didn't explain all that to father; he would have had a fit; but when I reached twenty-three without ever having seen a man except, as I have remarked before, dad and the gardener, I knew that I must do something, and I made up my mind to come to London, and I have come. It isn't all that I hoped it would be," she acknowledged, "you and I and girls like us are like trains I have seen run down a shunting line. Life is there," she went to the window and peered out, "dashing backwards and

forwards on the main lines. We are out of it, shunted, mere lookers-on. I suppose we could join in in a way if we liked to be bad, but vice without money is so hideously ugly. Have you ever noticed that? I have, I have watched and stared and noticed. Those slinking women who creep along the streets, those horrible men who leer at you as you walk past, those still worse impossible young ones, who follow you and ask you oilily to meet them outside the Tivoli and Piccadilly Tube Station. As if that was what I wanted, I who want life and love and the wonder of living."

She dropped her head suddenly on the window sill and Cynthia thought for a second that she was crying. Tears and Elsie, they went so badly together. Moved with a quick desire to help, Cynthia leaned forward and put a hand on Elsie's shoulder.

The girl shook it off and rose to her feet.

"I am not howling about it," she stated fiercely, "don't you dare suppose I am, West. I am going to fight for what I want; you wait and see if I don't get it."

CHAPTER IX

BACHELOR GIRLS

WITH aggressive, thrust-out chin, eager, questioning eyes, Elsie Hart faced life and took it stormily. The two girls, so different in natures, struck up one of those lasting and unbreakable friendships which used to belong exclusively to men in the days when woman looked on woman only as a possible rival, but which are very fairly common in these days of bachelor girls. As David loved Jonathan, with a love passing the love of women, so Cynthia and Elsie grew together, with a love that never aired itself as such : unsentimental, staunch, holding as its foundation a spirit of boyish comradeship. They did London together in their spare hours, for by now both of them were at work in different offices, Elsie with a solicitor down in the City, Cynthia as typist to a big firm in Grafton Street. They dined together at funny little out-of-the-way restaurants whose tariff came within their modest means, they spent innumerable evenings in the galleries of the different theatres, they took long walks together on Sundays—out to Kew Gardens or

across the various parks. Elsie even took Cynthia punting in Regent's Park one memorable Saturday afternoon, and, but for the fact that she inadvertently fell in and ruined what was to have been her best summer coat and skirt, the experiment might have been repeated. For Elsie, country born and bred, longed inexpressibly, especially in summer, for country delights such as boating, swimming, tennis, all of which were more or less denied her, the last named being too expensive and the two first being too popular with those whom Elsie sweepingly alluded to as the vulgar herd. They did once, Elsie as usual the guiding spirit, hire bathing garments of a sort and sally out early one morning to a pond set aside for female bathing in Battersea Park, but after one glimpse at their fellow bathers Cynthia, for one, had firmly refused to enter the water at all, and even Elsie, undefeated as she had been on that occasion, never suggested a repetition of the experiment.

Their amusements were perforce very limited and consisted chiefly in what they could derive by looking on at other people. Cynthia was in some odd way happy enough; she had come through a storm to which had succeeded the apathy of calm, but behind it all and ever beside her, forbidding her to sink altogether into a rut of contentment, was Elsie's aggressive face, her perpetual strife against Fate. When, for instance, they walked along the lighted streets of an evening, Cynthia light-heartedly discussing all the events of the day, this incident or that in the office routine, Elsie would suddenly pull her up with an exclamation to the effect that

"Office was a damnable institution and she didn't wish to hear about it." Then she would turn aside and insist on watching the wealthy, gorgeously attired guests arriving at the doors of the Carlton or Prince's, and—"It isn't fair," she would assert fiercely to the mildly surprised Cynthia, "those girls aren't any better looking or any nicer than you or I, and yet look at their clothes, see their men. That kind of man never looks at us."

"Why is it," she asked disconsolately as they made their way home one evening after one of these feasts of the eyes had been indulged in, "that that kind of man doesn't look at us? The ones who chase me on occasions are always impossible bounders with foreign faces and pointed boots. Why can't a really nice man with a motor-car," she was allowing her fancy to take high flights, "ask me to meet him somewhere?"

Cynthia racked her brains dutifully; she had learnt a surprising amount of wisdom during the last year.

"I expect it is because they see we are the same as they are," she suggested, "and are afraid we might be friends of friends of theirs."

"Rot!" retorted Elsie. "I have a jolly good mind to speak to one of them myself one of these days. It ought to amuse them more to take us out than the nasty common girls one sometimes sees them with."

She was perpetually seeing things, Elsie. Her eyes were so eager for knowledge that nothing had the faintest chance of escaping them, and whatever she saw was

passed on to Cynthia with added comments. It was Elsie who took Cynthia to the gallery of the Empire, much against the latter's better judgment, and opened her eyes to the alarming conduct of the gaudily dressed females in the lower boxes. Elsie had a passion for the gallery of a theatre, not for the view it gave her of the stage, nor for its cheapness, though that was no doubt an attraction, but because of the life she could watch going on underneath her in the rest of the house. To have her attention constantly called to this or that couple, because they were either holding hands, or just rubbing shoulders, or staring at each other, was a dreaded source of uneasiness to Cynthia. They reminded her of herself and Clennel, woke scarce understood sensations in her heart. Elsie viewed them only with impish curiosity. She was a student of human nature in that phase.

"She is in love with him, and he is bored," she would decide definitely in one glance, or: "Look at him, Cynthia; when a man gets that staring fit on it means he is very serious about it."

And Cynthia would dutifully look and drop her eyes quickly; the look on the man's face made her shiver.

Towards the middle of their first summer Elsie suddenly decided that not for one week longer could she bear Mrs. Board's lodging-house. For some time past she had sternly refused to partake of any of the meals, eating instead biscuits and such like unhealthinesses in her own room, and Cynthia with growing anxiety watched her friend visibly wilting until her face appeared all chin and eyes. The summer had been a hot one, and both girls

flagged under the strain of office through the interminable summer days. Elsie seemed to feel it more than Cynthia even; her restless spirit helped to wear the body out; she chafed at life, the high-walled houses stifled her, she could hardly drag her feet along the pavements for their usual evening walk. She dropped all interest in their little amusements too, everything bored her; in the spirit of Job she turned her face to the wall and longed for death. It was so unlike Elsie that Cynthia became desperate in her efforts to find something that would wake her friend from the apathy that was surrounding her, but all in vain; then some chance conversation that she overheard between two other girls gave her an idea.

"How would you like, when we move out of Mother Board's, to go into a little flat with me?" she asked Elsie. They had met as usual after office on Saturday afternoon in the park, and with the glowing certainty of a week's pay in their purses had expended 2*d.* each on armchairs because Elsie was tired. "I have heard of one we could get for 12*s.* 6*d.* furnished a week, just two rooms and a sort of wee kitchen. We could do most of our own cooking and get a woman in to do an hour's work for 3*s.* a week."

"A flat!" the bored eyes lit up for a second, then darkened again. "Don't suppose I could afford it," said Elsie morosely.

But Cynthia had seen her sign of hope. "Yes, you could," she explained eagerly, "I'll run the flat, I have got an allowance as well as my pay, you know, and oh!

how relieved I should be to get into some place really all our own, with no impossibly ladylike females to be for ever amused or disapproving. You shall pay me for board and lodging exactly what you pay Mrs. Board. Oh, do say yes, Elsie, and we will go and look over the place this very afternoon."

"I can't come and live on you," argued Elsie fiercely, "just because you have got an allowance."

"But you wouldn't be living on me," pleaded Cynthia, "you would be paying for your half of the flat and for living expenses. If you find you can't afford it, you needn't stay," she added artfully.

Elsie allowed herself to smile. "It does sound nice," she admitted.

"Doesn't it," agreed Cynthia; "and I have got pictures and curtains and cushions of my own packed away, we could make it look pretty and like home. Think, Elsie, really like home to come back to in the evenings."

"You will make it like home and I will live in it," supplemented Elsie. "You are a little fool not to have married, West, when you had the chance; it was what you were cut out for."

Anyway she offered no further objections to the plan, and together they sallied down to the wilds of Chelsea to inspect the new-found treasure.

"Chelsea is Bohemian and artistic and literary," bubbled Cynthia, as they climbed off their bus at Sloane Square and inquired the whereabouts of White's Avenue. "Can't you feel the atmosphere already, Elsie? look at the dear funny old houses, and there is positively a

man over there in a slouch hat and a flop black tie—he must be an artist.”

Elsie glanced across at the object of admiration cynically, but even she was a little excited at the prospect. “Yes, he is an artist all right,” she admitted grudgingly, “but one of the dirty ones. Still, there may be some nice ones about.”

Their new abode (of course they took it at once, fiery dragons in the path would not have stopped them once they had seen it), was the top floor flat in a quaint, tumbling down house in one of the oldest parts of Chelsea. A studio with a north light, as their would-be landlord gravely informed them. Cynthia and Elsie, a little out of breath after climbing up two flights of remarkably steep stairs, just squeezed each other’s hands and tried to restrain the shout of joy that rose to their lips. It was undoubtedly an attractive little place, untidy perhaps, dirty, had they paused to run their fingers along the tables or shelves, but high up, breeze swept, cheerful.

“One positively looks out on trees from this window,” Elsie discovered, investigating the so-called kitchen.

“And from this,” Cynthia called back from the tiny little bedroom in the front of the house.

“We will leave it just as it is,” stated Elsie; her tiredness gone, she took complete possession of affairs. “Family pictures and curtains and cushions would spoil it,” she glanced severely at Cynthia. “We will keep it a studio, not a drawing-room,” she said, “with those dear funny old drawings on the wall, that ragged old

curtain over the window, these wicker comfortable chairs. I love it all, don't you ? ”

The landlord, his shrewd eyes blinking under shaggy eyebrows, watched their intense delight with amused regret that he had not asked a little more for the rent.

“ You are getting it very cheap,” he reminded them, “ even with the extras——” at the dismayed expression which dashed across their faces his usually kind heart rose to the occasion. “ But there,” he went on with a wave of his hand, “ we will not say anything about extras. You shall have it as it stands, with even the shillingsworth of gas still to run in the metre, for 12*s.* 6*d.* a week.”

Which extraordinary generosity, considering the rent of the flat had been settled at 12*s.* for its very highest and the shilling in the metre belonged to his last client, was a true indication of Mr. Mathews' nature.

“ He would sell the winding-sheet off his dead father,” Mrs. Thomas explained to the two girls on the Sunday in which she helped them to move in. Mrs. Thomas was a small, withered, but intensely voluble charwoman, who saw to the well-being of all the other inmates of 24, White's Avenue, and whom Cynthia had engaged to undertake the arduous duties of washing up and generally keeping the flat clean for the modest sum of 3*s.* a week.

“ She can't make our beds,” Elsie had decided firmly, “ she is too dirty, and we shall probably have to wash up everything after her ; still, I suppose she will do a certain amount of the dirty work for us.”

"And she is awfully willing and anxious to work," added Cynthia. "I feel we ought to put up with her if we can, she needs even our 3s. a week." Cynthia had already heard several rambling accounts of Mrs. Thomas' hard lot in life.

"Oh, well, of course, if our munificent salary is keeping her and a large family of children out of the workhouse," Elsie agreed, "I can foresee that no amount of dirt and discomfort is going to persuade you to part with her. You are a soft-hearted ass, West."

For that matter even she was bound to admit that Mrs. Thomas outwardly at least kept things remarkably clean and tidy. Cynthia once had the misfortune, on a morning when she happened to have a cold and couldn't go to office, to watch the process, but she was careful not to pass the knowledge thus gained on to Elsie. Mrs. Thomas' methods of dealing with uncleanness were prompt and excessively rapid. From the dim recesses of a cupboard in their little kitchen, which room it may be noticed in passing was really only an alcove off the studio, a little lower than the rest of the flooring and reached by three steps, she produced a tiny, dingy-looking tin basin, and spreading a sheet of the morning's newspaper on the top step placed the basin thereon and collected round it all the china and glass, spoons and forks, saucepans and frying-pans, that had been used by the girls in their cooking of the night before and for supper and breakfast. These arranged, as many of them as could be found room for in the basin and the rest piled up waiting their turn, Mrs. Thomas filled up

the basin with boiling water and leaving the things to soak—"It do help in getting the grease off, miss"—gathered her skirts round her, stepped nimbly over the obstacle and proceeded to flirt with the dusting of the room.

On the occasion when Cynthia had the felicity of watching these proceedings, Mrs. Thomas was apparently chary of making too much dust and limited her efforts very considerably.

"I don't hold with cleaning a place too thoroughly every day, do you, miss?" she asked Cynthia. "Don't seem to pay one somehow for the labour. Something what you can put your back into and scrub clean, is what I appreciate. Not that I don't have enough of that." She rested from her labours in the middle of the room, arms akimbo and face reminiscent of many things. "What with Miss Powell on the ground floor, for ever a nagging at me to scrub out her old boiler, and that old lady, down below you, so to speak, miss, who is that particular I daren't even let me hands be a bit dirty for her to see. Would you believe it, miss, I keeps one apron specially for that floor, this don't do for the likes of her." With the forefinger and thumb of her right hand she elevated a corner of the remarkably dirty piece of sacking which acted as apron and general dust sheet for her person.

"It is difficult to keep clean when one has house-work to do," agreed Cynthia politely. She laid down her book since her attention was plainly being asked for. "Is Miss Powell very fussy about her flat?—We

have never met her, you know, but we do hear her sometimes talking to you in the morning." Which was strictly true, there were mornings when Miss Powell's voice, shrill and authoritative, filled the whole house.

"Talk, is it, miss?" Mrs. Thomas shrugged her shoulders and shook a lock of hair off her forehead. "She can talk the leg off a horse. Says she to me the other day after some long argumentation about a milk saucepan what I had overlooked scrubbing out, 'Are you working for the two new young ladies upstairs?' Yes, I am, says I. It being a straight question and calling for an answer, generally I keeps my mouth shut and lets her talk alone, being too busy to argue. 'And nice easy young ladies they be to work for.' Meant that for a sort of snub for her, I did, miss. 'Careless and don't mind dirt, I expect you mean,' says she, and I that took aback at her rudeness to you as whom she doesn't even know that I couldn't say nothing for a moment. But there"—Mrs. Thomas, glanced darkly at Cynthia—"what can one expect, a Roman Catholic she is, miss, always the ones for rude speaking."

Cynthia had to laugh at the depths of Miss Powell's summing up. "Your water will be getting cold, Mrs. Thomas," she ventured, nodding in the direction of the unspeakable jumble adorning the top step.

"That is the honest truth," agreed Mrs. Thomas, "and here am I, so to speak, wasting my time chatting with you, miss."

She made a hasty dive back into the kitchen and with what appeared to be a peculiarly greasy rag tied to

the end of a stick she did some busy work in the swishing out of saucepans, etc. Everything was washed in the same water and dried with the same towel. Cynthia, feeling a little pale and somewhat as if she never wished to eat or drink again, watched the tumblers being given a final polish on the under side of Mrs. Thomas's apron.

"There," remarked that worthy, preparatory to removing the dish water, as the top flat's kitchen lacked a sink and all such things had to be emptied downstairs, "you'll do now, miss," she glanced appreciatively round the room, "nice and clean till to-morrow."

Despite this insight into her somewhat unclean habits, Cynthia remained loyal in her determination to put up with Mrs. Thomas, she knew that behind the dingy dirt and strenuous tongue wagging of the little woman lay real strenuous courage and grit. Mrs. Thomas worked and slaved and toiled to the best of her ability to keep a husband who drank and five little children whom she at least adored. It was a brave fight carried on against enormous odds. Cynthia learned in time honestly to respect Mrs. Thomas, a feeling shared by all the other flat owners, including even grim Roman Catholic Miss Powell.

Mr. Mathews, their erratic landlord, was the personality in their new abode in which Cynthia and Elsie took the most interest. Elsie summed him up rather dramatically.

"He is a mystery," she decided, "and probably

an uncertified lunatic ; we ought to be very careful of him."

"His eyes, somehow, make me feel sorry for him," said Cynthia, "they are like some great dog's, and as if he was always afraid of something hurting him."

"Perhaps he is an escaped criminal," was another theory of Elsie's, "he is dirty enough for anything. I hadn't noticed his eyes, but he evidently wears his hair long as a sort of disguise."

"Mrs. Thomas says he is a miser," Cynthia put in, "and that she is never allowed inside his room even to sweep. Yesterday when I went down to pay the rent he opened his door himself and peered at me in such an odd way. I could just see a bit of his room, it was awful. I believe he sleeps in his clothes and eats out of the same plate as the cat."

"Ugh !" shivered Elsie, "what a disgusting idea. I tell you what, West, we will have to decide on keeping that one chair for him and that cushion, and for anyone else it will be taboo."

For Mathews occasionally, in an odd furtive way peculiar to all his actions, would favour them with a visit in the evening, and, once inside the room and his nervousness vanquished by their friendliness, he could become quite interesting, talking in a rambling way of subjects dear to his heart, such as spiritualism, ghosts, mesmerism, hypnotism. He talked mainly to Cynthia ; perhaps instinctively in her he recognized the weaker, more feminine character of the two.

"I could mesmerize you in five minutes," he would

say earnestly, leaning forward in his chair, running his fingers through his untidy hair, "you are a born medium. After one or two sittings there would be nothing I couldn't make you see or do."

"Why not me?" asked Elsie, the inevitable cigarette in her fingers, her eyes investigating as usual. "Why shouldn't I be able to see ghosts and things?"

Some shade of worried perplexity always descended on Mathews when threatened by a straight question, his eyes blinked and wavered. "I don't know," he answered; "you are not psychic, Miss Hart."

"Too strong willed, do you mean?" queried Elsie.

"No, not that exactly," he would tug at his ragged hair when driven into these corners, "but not sympathetic. Now Miss Weston is totally different; her eyes give her away. I could show you things," he leant forward and stared at Cynthia; "will you let me try? it is interesting."

But Cynthia was firmly unwilling, she would not even consent to a table-turning séance, though Elsie did her best to persuade her on that point. "It is not like being hypnotized," she argued, "the man can't get any power over you: do try, just for the fun of the thing, West."

"I am ridiculously frightened at the idea," argued Cynthia, and from that standpoint nothing would move her.

CHAPTER X

TED AND A TEA-PARTY

IT was indirectly through Mathews and Mathews' desire to mesmerize her that Cynthia first became aware of the presence of Ted Hunter in her life. He had been up till then merely one of the indefinite figures that moved backwards and forwards across her days in office. There were a great many of these same figures; Mr. Thompson for one, general manager of the business; Mr. Townsend, a rough-voiced, large-boned, good-natured man who reigned in the reception room and dealt, generally speaking, with the dictating of Cynthia's letters; Miss Richards, a pretty, anæmic-looking girl, with hair that continually needed arrangement in whatever glass was handy and talon-like fingers, the nails of which she was for ever polishing. Then there was the staff of apprentices, young girls with their hair either down or in a transitory stage of black bows and half pigtails, and one or two young men. Vague, indefinite personalities all of them, perpetually talking in whispers

among themselves of what "he said to me and I then said to him." Cynthia was on fairly friendly terms with all of them with the exception of Miss Richards, who appeared to regard her with unlimited dislike, but then Miss Richards was admittedly hard to get on with, having a peculiarly spiteful aversion to any one of her own sex under the age of forty. Even Townsend, in all his noisy desire for some one to talk to, never succeeded in getting beyond the barest exchange of civilities with Miss Richards.

But though she spent all her days with them, and learned during varied scraps of conversation nearly all their various family histories, they yet remained vague forms to Cynthia. Probably because her friendship and life with Elsie was at that time occupying her attention ; and Elsie was so sweeping in her assertion that there could be nothing in the least interesting in any one that had anything to do with an office. Ted Hunter, for instance, until that afternoon when mesmerism was the subject chosen for discussion by Miss Richards at tea-time, had never even taken definite shape in Cynthia's eyes ; she could not have described what he looked like, nor the colour of his eyes or hair. He was a person upon whom the rest of the staff expended an unlimited curiosity, but that she did not know ; and she had even on one or two occasions heard his eyes alluded to as beautiful, but otherwise Cynthia was blissfully unconscious of the man. Then, on this afternoon, Cynthia, having at tea told them about Mr. Mathews and his fervent admiration of her as a medium,

found Ted Hunter strangely interested in the discussion. After she had gone back to her own little room where she spent most of the day typing in lonely splendour, he followed her, to her surprise, and stood staring out of the window, his back towards her, while Cynthia shifted her papers about and wondered at the reason of his visit. When it came, it brought with it a fresh shock of surprise.

"You won't let this landlord of yours play any games of that sort on you, will you?" asked Ted abruptly. He turned to face her, but, his back being to the light, Cynthia caught only an impression of square-shouldered strength and obstinacy in the man's figure.

It was so unexpected, his sudden intense interest, that Cynthia laughed a little.

"Does it sound dangerous?" she asked; "are you keen on that sort of subject, Mr. Hunter?"

"It sounds hateful," the man answered, his hands deep in his pockets and evidently staring at her though his face was too much in the shadow for her to see his eyes. "For that matter," he went on, "it is hateful to think of you running a flat on your own and with no one to see that things are made nice and comfortable for you. Do you ever have proper meals?"

The attack was so sudden that for a moment Cynthia forgot how strange it was that this man, to whom she had hardly ever spoken, should feel all this about her, and again she laughed at the intense seriousness of his voice.

"I am getting quite a good cook," she assured him.

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"What has given you the idea that I am such a hopelessly inefficient, incapable - of - looking - after - myself sort of person?"

"I don't know," answered the man. He took his hands from his pockets and moved over to the door; suddenly he seemed to be shy. "Beastly cheek on my part, I expect you think."

"Oh, no," Cynthia shook her head, the fact that he considered it so made her wish to put him at his ease, "I think it is very nice of you." She lifted her eyes to smile at him and met his grey ones.

Then it was that a little shock of surprised knowledge touched for a moment at her heart, and from then onwards, though she very studiously ignored the fact, a man's personality took its share once again in Cynthia's thoughts, though what she had read in his eyes remained an unexplained secret even to her own mind.

About six months after that the inhabitants of the top flat in 24, White's Avenue, gave a tea-party. Every available chair was occupied, four of the guests adorned Cynthia's bed, which in the daytime formed an ornamental couch in one corner of the studio, and several people were artistically disposed upon cushions thrown upon the floor. The room was undoubtedly overcrowded, but every window, including the celebrated north lighter, was wide open, and no one seemed to be disconcerted by the congested atmosphere. Mr. Mathews, nervously self-conscious that he had on quite a clean collar and a new tie which he had that morning purchased for 3d. from an old clothes shop in King's

Road, occupied his specially reserved chair. He had attempted to resign it once or twice to some of the lady guests, but both his hostesses had been firmly insistent on his retaining his accustomed seat and he had finally given up the struggle; besides, all the ladies had found chairs by now except the central figure in the room, and she was far too busy declaiming and talking to wish to sit down. Mathews, blinking at her with shrewd, shifty eyes, decided at once that here was nothing in the least psychic; the very force and energy of the girl's figure, her earnest rather heated face, gave him the impression of a force resistless and restless; her flow of words left him mentally tired.

Miss Shaw, the lady in question, was a friend that Elsie had foregathered with at a suffragette meeting which she and Cynthia had attended by way of having their minds opened on the burning question of Women's Rights. They were not either of them at heart suffragettes, but for that matter neither was Miss Shaw; she did hold on the other hand vivid views on the question of the equality of the sexes and it was this subject that she was holding forth on now, the very boldness and bluntness of her views paralysing the rest of the party into silence.

"It is freedom we ask for and must have," she declaimed, "freedom to think, to learn, to know. For years," her eyes swept contemptuously over the limited members of the opposite sex that were present, "you have kept us as it were in a prison; woman has been blinded, stunted in her growth, denied the right of free thought

or free life. Suffragettism may be ridiculous, but it is the turning point of our sex. You have given us education, grudgingly it is true, but still you have given it; now we stand forth to reap the fruits. You cannot push us back, we must go forwards. Freedom is our goal, freedom our war-cry."

"Freedom for what," asked an irreverent voice—that of Tom Short, concluded Mathews, the younger of the two brothers who shared the opposite flat on the top floor. Mathews had himself so often suffered from this same irreverence.

"To live our lives as we choose," was the swift reply, "not to be either the slave or the adored pampered pet of any man. We don't want pedestals or chains, we want equality. One of the very first things we shall do when we come into power is to abolish the institution of marriage as it stands to-day."

A roar of delighted laughter went round at this sally.

"Then when we come to the bottom of things," young Short's voice, calmly investigating, continued the discussion, "it is free love that women are really after, a state of things that has been clamoured for by immoral man ever since the world began."

"Oh, shut up, Tom," put in his brother from the opposite end of the room. "For heaven's sake don't start your views on morals; remember we are at a tea-party."

But the glove had been thrown down.

"And if you abolish marriage," Miss Powell leant forward on the rather rickety chair that had fallen

to her share, her hatchet face, from which the hair was most unbecomingly strained back, only redeemed from absolute plainness by a pair of large soft brown eyes, "what is to become of the home and the family? I think it is rather extraordinary to discuss these things among men and women; still, as it has commenced and is so interesting, I advance this as my theory. It has always appeared to me that the family is an insurmountable barrier in the way of woman's freedom."

"It certainly is one of them," agreed Short. He turned mockingly to the central figure. "How do we get over it, O Pioneer?" he asked.

It seemed as if Miss Shaw hesitated for a second. "You have overlooked the fact that I said abolish marriage as it stands at present," she said finally. "It was not I who clamoured for free love. Of course there must be something in the way of marriage at the back of the home, I can see that; I only claim that it shall be an arrangement based on the equality of the sexes," she was warming to her subject again, "that woman shall not be the chattel of man, to be bought with his money, to live in his service till death frees her. So long as the word 'obey' remains in the marriage service, marriage is and will be degrading to us as free women."

"I don't know about being bought with his money," put in Short drily, "she generally spends it for him, if that is what you mean."

"You are so horribly material," suddenly Elsie

spoke, she moved from the window seat where she had up till now been a silent observer of the scene. "I agree with Miss Shaw in everything she has said, only, put ungrammatically, more so. I would not give way to Miss Powell's view an inch; why should we be sacrificed to the family? have we no right to live in ourselves? must everything we do be hedged in and governed by the future generations? I claim life for myself." She dismissed the subject as finished, and dropped into a place that had been kept for her on the couch. "Will some one pass me a buttered bun, please, and Tom, push Miss Shaw into a seat and feed her; the discussion on woman's rights is now closed; let's talk about ghosts."

"And you, do you believe in all that?" asked Ted Hunter of Cynthia. He was by way of helping her with the pouring out of tea down in the little kitchen, the two of them almost as it were shut off from the rest of the party, since there was barely room for two people, let alone more, in the alcove.

"Of course," answered Cynthia firmly, "I am an awfully deep believer in feminism, only I never attempt to talk about it, because I am so dreadfully stupid at arguing. Miss Shaw is awfully clever, isn't she?"

Ted handed relays of cups up the steps to young Short and returned to the attack. "She talks a lot," he admitted, "but it appears to my slow brain that she is ignoring the most important element in life. What about love?—doesn't a man's love count for anything to a woman?"

Cynthia felt herself blushing, and waxed furiously angry on the spot.

"It is the bait he tries to catch us with," she answered icily. "Do you mind going into the front room and fetching me some more water in the kettle, Mr. Hunter?"

Ted went, and Cynthia for about the hundredth time in the past month tried to face her own mind on the feelings this man roused in her. What was the curious sensation that held her in his nearness, something that was almost fear and yet half pleasure. Once in some heated discussion—for of late he had been in the habit of spending much of his spare time in Cynthia's room at office—he had put out his hand and caught hers, to denote that he had more physical strength than she. They had both of them laughed at the time, and Cynthia had not drawn her hand away, which would have been her first instinctive movement, because she wished him to imagine her cool and untroubled by the contact. She made no attempt to understand herself; shall we say she was firm in her disregard of the situation? Only at times like this, when at some sentence of his or just at the chance meeting of their eyes, she ran full tilt into the knowledge of how curiously her heart could behave, did she ever admit even to herself that here was a puzzle which would some day have to be faced?

She was calmness itself when he returned presently with the filled kettle.

"Have you ever read Cicely Hamilton's book

Marriage as a Trade? " she asked. "It is very clever, and it answers your question much better than I can. 'How much longer will man,' she writes, 'expect women to do all the dirty work of the house in return for a little affection?'"

"I haven't read it," acknowledged Ted, "and somehow I don't want to. It strikes me as a rotten way to look at life."

"Merely because you don't like being defeated in your own arguments?" asked Cynthia.

"Not quite," he answered, "it wouldn't defeat me, I don't suppose, because at the back of my head I know the writer hasn't, can't have got hold of the right idea."

"You may be the kind of man," suggested Cynthia, "who puts the object of his affection on a pedestal: a very dull life for her."

"Perhaps," he agreed quietly, but as he stood aside to let her go up the steps into the studio she met his eyes and knew with an odd feeling of contrition that she had hurt him. Yet why should she mind hurting him? His feelings were nothing to her, absolutely nothing.

"I don't object to that office man of yours as much as I expected to," announced Elsie, their guests having departed and a certain amount of order having been restored to the room. "I was afraid I was going to see something awful in the way of long hair, no waistcoat, and hand-washing manners."

"Why?" asked Cynthia. She had unearthed some stockings that required darning and with head bent

over them hid the resentment that Elsie's speech aroused.

"Don't know," agreed Elsie carelessly. She walked about the room and came to a standstill by the window. "Didn't think he would be so much of a gentleman, perhaps."

"I don't know why you should think I would be friends with him or ask him here if that was the case," retorted Cynthia.

"Oh, well," Elsie turned to face her with a laugh, "no need to get annoyed, old girl. You have always told me they were rather terrible, and——"

"That is just it," put in Cynthia eagerly, "the rest of the people are rather terrible, and it makes me sorry for the boy. He is different and he hates his life and the work and everything about it, and yet he goes on doing it because he thinks it is his duty." She flushed warmly. "You don't know what a rotten life he has had."

"Humph!" remarked Elsie, her eyes merciless, "and talking about boys, this particular specimen is thirty-three, didn't you say?"

"Well?" asked Cynthia, head high.

"Don't let yourself in for anything mug-like, that is all," commented Elsie. "I had my eye on you two once or twice this afternoon and the 'boy,' as you call him, has got the staring fit pretty badly. His eyes are hungry when they look at you, West. Oh, I am not a prig about that kind of thing, as you know, only it is not quite fair of you. If his life is rotten

as you say, are you making it any easier, do you think, by rousing a desire you haven't the slightest intention of satisfying, can't satisfy for that matter, since the man isn't even in the same class as yourself?"

Cynthia rose, throwing aside the stocking, face gloriously red by now.

"I think you are horrid, Elsie, perfectly horrid, to talk like that. Sometimes it seems to me as if you thought so much about this one subject that you have gone mad about it. Love, love, you see it all round you, you are for ever talking about, thinking about it. It's disgusting. Can't you at least leave me alone about it, when you know how I hate the subject?"

Elsie watched her with growing surprise, and, as Cynthia rushed into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her, broke into a low whistle.

"That is bad," she commented to herself, "and yet—" she turned to the window again, her face suddenly intent and passionate, "what right have I to talk to her about it? West got near the truth then," her words had dropped back into thoughts, she was not speaking aloud now, only thinking, "I do see love all round me, and feel it and breathe it. It is closing on me like a net, I can't escape, I don't even think I want to." She pushed open the window and leaned out. Underneath, in his little strip of back garden, Mathews was busily engaged, assisted by his cat, and under the direction of Miss Powell, in bedding out hyacinths. The evening was breathless, so still that all round like a faint hum the noise of London

life and London work sounded in her ears, and a weird purple curtain of haze hung over the faint, far-away outlines of Brompton Oratory and the neighbouring museums. Elsie drew in her head with a little intake of breath, her face alive with some purpose, then she stepped across to the bedroom door and opened it.

"Just going out for an hour or two, West," she remarked, "sorry I was rude about the man; didn't really mean to be."

"Where are you going?" asked Cynthia. She emerged from tidying up the linen cupboard, face still slightly flushed. "Shall I come too?"

"If you like," answered Elsie (a pressing desire for company did not sound in her voice), "but I shan't be an entertaining companion; I am just going to walk fast and far."

"Oh!" said Cynthia; she looked away quickly. She was perhaps a little hurt; of late Elsie had so often had a mood which required walking off alone, and Cynthia was very sensitive to the "I want to get away from every one, even you" attitude in Elsie. "Then I won't come," she added, trying to keep her voice unconcerned. "You won't be late, will you?"

"I'll try not to be," Elsie answered; "but if the spirit moves me, I may just eat a bun for supper somewhere in the wilds, so don't wait for me. There is no cooking to be done, is there?"

"No," admitted Cynthia; "but come back if you can."

"All right," agreed Elsie. She moved to the door.

But she was not quite so good as her word. It was long after the rest of the household's lights had been extinguished, and silence, combined with a conviction that the studio was haunted, had driven Cynthia into the front room to sit by an open window, that she heard Elsie's quick light step on the paved front path. Some one was with her, who, Cynthia could not imagine; but urged by curiosity she stood up and craned cautiously out of the window.

In the dim light Elsie's companion could be seen as a tall, rather heavily built man, not either of the Shorts then, and certainly not Mr. Mathews. Unrealizingly Cynthia spied on them and saw Elsie's face, just where a glint from the nearest street lamp caught it, white and intensely serious, lifted to the man. She saw the two figures sway together and the man's arms go round the girl, his head bend over hers. With what was very nearly a scream Cynthia drew in her head and stood up. Who was this man outside with Elsie? What did the scene she had just witnessed mean?

Quickly, leaving the lights still on since Elsie might have noticed them, Cynthia made a dive into the next room and into bed, turning her face to the wall, dragging the sheet up over cheeks that tingled. Hours seemed to creep by as she lay there, though it was probably only a few minutes; then the door opened and Elsie slipped into the room. Cynthia could imagine the relieved glance darted at her apparently sleeping form, then, making as little noise as possible, Elsie extinguished the lights and crept into her own room.

CHAPTER XI

THE PULSE OF PASSION

ELSIE was awake next morning very early and in a radiant mood. She dashed into Cynthia's room quarter of an hour before Mrs. Thomas with the morning's milk was supposed to arouse them.

"Weston," she said, poising herself at the end of the bed with a pillow in one hand ready to throw at the slumbering form, "wake up. Have you realized that it is Monday? Horrible day, Monday, that is why I won't be awake one quarter of an hour earlier than you, to feel its horror. Wake up!"

The pillow landed neatly, but Cynthia was sufficiently awake to ward it off from her face. It had been a troubled night for her, haunted by distressed dreams. She could not for the moment remember why, but she knew she had fallen asleep dreadfully worried about something.

"Are you going to do breakfast this morning?" she asked in natural surprise. It was a duty that as a general rule fell entirely to her share, Elsie being a late sleeper.

The other girl laughed at the note of interrogation. "Yes," she admitted, "I positively am. Poor old

West, why don't you make me do it more often; you are training me to be selfish, you know. Boiled, fried or poached, the eggs, I mean?"

"Let's have them poached or fried," Cynthia answered. She sat up in bed blinking sleepily at the long figure clad in bright blue pyjamas. "In this sort of weather the eggs are so often bad."

"And if they are poached," asked Elsie, pausing in her work to glance up with a face of horrified disgust.

"You smell them when you break them into the cup," Cynthia explained.

"Thanks, my child," said Elsie. She skipped nimbly from the kitchen, falling over the top step, a customary habit of hers, and ejaculating her favourite swear word at the incident. "You shall do the cooking, dearest, I will lay the table."

They always breakfasted in dressing-gowns and pyjamas, the meal being consumed as a general rule by Elsie in a state of morose silence. She was typically English in so far that it was very hard for her to wake up in the mornings, and she was nearly always very cross, (peevish she described it herself) until about eleven a.m. But on this morning it was the other way round; Cynthia, generally full of amiability and a desire to talk at the morning meal, was silent, while Elsie carried on an animated, one-sided conversation.

"What on earth is up with you, West?" she asked at last in desperation, laying down the paper. "Of

course I know it is Monday, and 'The daily round, the common task, etc.,' lies in front of us. But that can't account for all this gloom."

"It doesn't," admitted Cynthia. She moved back her chair from the table and fidgeted with a portion of toast on her plate. "I am worried."

"What about?" asked Elsie. "Get it off your chest. I won't look at you, I will conceal an earnest and attentive face behind the paper."

"I don't mind being looked at, though you probably will be rather annoyed with me," announced Cynthia. "It is about last night. I—I wasn't really asleep when you came in, Elsie. I waited for you in your room by the window, because this room always frightens me when I am alone."

Her voice seemed to be falling on a horrible silence and she glanced up nervously. Elsie was staring at her, her face set stern.

"You saw, then," she asked.

"Yes," admitted Cynthia, and the colour flew to her face.

"Well, what of it?" Elsie pushed back her chair and stood up. "I don't mind your knowing, you had to sooner or later, but I won't be questioned, West, or remonstrated with." Her voice was aggressive, hard. "You remember our contract when we moved in here, that neither of us should in any way attempt to interfere with the liberty of the other?" She moved abruptly over to the window and stood with her back to the table.

"I don't want to interfere," put in Cynthia humbly. Fate pays back on us all we do to other people, and she was feeling now as Mattie had felt when she too had had the door of confidences closed on her. "It was just that I wanted to tell you that I had seen, and that I didn't want to spy on you, Elsie."

The figure at the window swung round to her, face softened, eyes alight. "Of course you didn't," Elsie admitted. "I am a brute to have said that, West, and I will tell you all there is to tell sometime, but not now because it is a long story and we will both be late for office. After all," she came across the room and paused by Cynthia, hands out, "if I tell you that I am the happiest girl alive, it sums up most of what I shall have to report this evening. I am in love, West, it is the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most glorious," her voice dropped, it was the first time Cynthia had ever seen Elsie blush and it made the girl's face for the moment almost beautiful, "and I think perhaps the strangest thing that has ever come into my life."

That was disturbing intelligence to take to office. Cynthia found herself thinking over Elsie's description of being in love again and again. Was it really such a radiant thing, this that she had so strenuously barred her heart and mind to?

They interfered with clear, well-balanced reason, these thoughts, and made her restless and uneasy in Ted Hunter's presence.

"I wish you wouldn't stare at me so persistently," she said at last. "It is an awfully aggravating habit of

yours. How would you like it if I came and stared at you all the time you were working ? ”

“ I shouldn’t mind,” he answered. He moved from his place by the window and came and stood opposite her.

“ Yes, you would,” retorted Cynthia. Suddenly she felt as if at all costs there must be truth between them, as if, were this disturbing influence but put into words, she would the more easily defeat it. “ At least you would if my eyes were always asking you an unknown question.”

“ Unknown,” the man repeated, his eyes studiously lowered. “ I wonder if you really mean unknown. Wouldn’t it be more truthful if you said a question that there is no use putting into words, because I know quite well what the answer would be.”

Something in his face moved Cynthia to the same quick feeling of compassion that she had felt towards Clennel on the day he proposed, almost instinctively her hands went out to comfort, but the man didn’t notice the action and she drew them back again.

“ Wouldn’t it be better, even if you know what the answer is going to be, for you to ask the question ? ” she pursued her path of truth. “ Then we could sort of understand things and be all the better friends afterwards. I don’t know what it is,” she went on recklessly, her own feelings being quite outside her understanding, “ but there is something between us that is uncomfortable. Let’s tell the truth to each other,” she begged, leaning a little towards him, “ and pull down this indefinite something.”

"You can't do that," Ted answered. He lifted his eyes and looked at her. "I could tell the truth, not that there is any need to, because in your heart you know what my question is, but you——" He broke off suddenly, and bending forward put his hand on hers where it lay on the table. "Do you think," he asked, "that I don't know when I hold your hand like this how little it means to you, nothing probably except a little surprise at my want of respect, while to me——" he straightened himself, thrusting both hands in his pockets. "I am a damned fool," he said; "that is why there is this uncomfortable wall between us as you call it, I can't be friends."

"But," asked Cynthia she was out for investigation and quite careless of the pain it might inflict, "do you honestly mean that it matters whose hand it is? I mean, if it was dark and you couldn't see me, wouldn't any girl's hand do as well?"

"No, it wouldn't," answered Ted, a little anger mixed with the hurt. "You seem to have a very high opinion of men, Miss Weston."

"Oh, it isn't that," Cynthia explained very seriously, "it is only just really because I do want to understand. I know if you are in love you want to hold hands and, well, kiss each other—and it has always appeared to me that since it was only a question of sensation, well——" she paused a moment, "why shouldn't any other hand that was willing do?" she asked.

The man laughed a little bitterly. "God knows," he said, "things might be easier in this world if it

moved on such simple lines as those. Shall we talk about something else next time I come in ? ” He stood with his hand on the door, his eyes sullen, giving his face a curiously set expression. “ I sometimes wonder if this isn’t all a game to you, in which case do you ever stop to consider that perhaps it isn’t quite so funny for me ? ”

As a matter of fact he gave her on that particular day no further opportunity for truth seeking. He rather studiously avoided her and Cynthia spent a monotonous afternoon typing addresses on envelopes. She missed his periodical visits, that is undoubtedly true, and she was a little troubled to think that he had certainly been hurt by something that she had said, for she had no wish to hurt him. A little of his melancholy communicated itself to her, and when it came to six o’clock she sought him out in the by this time deserted workroom, intent on patching up the quarrel.

She found him still gloomily immersed in his work, his light being the only one in the room still burning.

“ Are you going to work all night ? ” she ventured nervously, having stood beside him apparently unnoticed for several minutes.

“ It is very good of you to take so much interest, ” he answered stiffly ; “ I thought I might as well finish this, there is nothing much else to do. ”

A consciousness of how hopelessly dull and unpalatable his life was—for in the early days of their acquaintance he had told her of how relentlessly Fate and a strong sense of duty had bound him to a life and work

he hated—moved Cynthia to a quick rush of contrition that she herself should have done anything to make things harder for him to bear.

“I looked in to say good-night,” she hesitated, then went on breathlessly, “and to say I was sorry about this morning. Sometimes it must seem as if I just simply laid myself out to hurt you, and I don’t really—you know, don’t you, that I never mean half I say?”

Ted turned to her quickly. “Of course you don’t,” he said, “and you aren’t ever anything but nice. It is I who am a bad-tempered bear.”

“Then we are friends,” asked Cynthia. She held out her hand, her eyes shining, the ready smile dimpling her face.

“Yes, friends,” the man answered. He stood up, taking her hand in his, but again his eyes, always so much more eloquent than his lips, asked for more, and Cynthia felt the indefinite wall more sternly between them than ever. With her breath coming a little quicker, and her heart behaving in the most curious way, almost as if it were urging her with physical force to press near the man and hide her face away from his eyes against his shoulder, she drew her hand away and tried to laugh.

“I am glad we are friends,” she whispered, and turned and fled from the room.

And Elsie, well, Elsie’s story was very simply and shortly told. Not that Cynthia found that it did very much to clear up the discomfort and general upsetting effect of the day, but that was hardly to be expected.

“I have known him now three weeks,” Elsie said,

"very nearly a month, and I met him first at South Kensington Station. Now there is no use looking shocked or saying, 'Oh, Elsie!' If I am to tell you anything at all you must keep quite still, however shocked you are, and say nothing. I met him at South Kensington Station——" She paused and lay back on the couch, hands behind her head, eyes on the ceiling. "He was coming down the steps, I was going up. It was one of those evenings, West, when there was inside me such a devil of discontent that I would gladly have done anything, however bad, so long as it was exciting. You know the customary day in office, the petty details, the hopeless monotony. Then the same stupid walk home, the tube, the walk at this end, supper to cook, stockings to darn. O pleasant, don't think me horribly rude, but monotonous, damned monotonous. Well, as we passed each other on the stairs he caught me staring at him. I suppose I wasn't able to keep all the envy out of my eyes, he looked so radiantly satisfied with life, nice looking—he is that, you know—immaculately turned out from his polished boots to his hat, careless and as if he had everything in the world he wanted. I suppose my sulky face struck on his fancy as something humorous—he swears now that it was love at first sight, perhaps it was—anyway when he took his hat off he was laughing at me. 'Rotten world?' he asked, stopping on the stairs, hat in hand, and the laughter in his eyes. And I, oh well, I was feeling just rotten. All that I wanted of life and couldn't have was making of itself a huge lump in my throat that wouldn't be swal-

lowed. I suppose I stood there blinking at him, probably red about the eyes and nose, for he suddenly dived under the central handrail that divides the staircase and stood beside me. 'Is it as bad as that?' he asked, 'poor little girl.' "

She sat up straight and glanced defiantly at Cynthia. "Of course you may think it was cheek his talking to me like that," she said; "I think it was fine."

"So do I," acknowledged Cynthia generously, "and then?"

Elsie regarded her in some surprise; she had expected shocked reproof; Cynthia was, generally speaking, firmly against picking up friends.

"Well, then, I don't remember exactly what I said, but anyway he came up into the street and walked a bit of the way home with me and gave me his card and address and asked me to write him, and I—I did, three days afterwards. I have been to his flat—he is very rich, you know, Cynthia—pretty often since, and to the theatre. We generally meet once a day at least, sometimes he calls for me at the office in his car and takes me out to lunch." She slipped from the couch to a kneeling position at Cynthia's side. "Are you surprised," she asked, "that I should have kept all this secret from you? It was his idea; he so wanted to keep it our secret. He is funny about not wanting to meet you; it would break the charm, he says, if he saw where and how I lived. It sounds ridiculous, but in a way I understand, because I feel the same about his life and the people he knows. We are enough for each other. When

we are together there is absolutely no one else that counts. But I have wanted to tell you all along."

"Of course I am not hurt," answered Cynthia, trying to make the words sound true. She would miss Elsie out of her life more than any other companionship. "When is the wedding to be?"

Her question was greeted with silence and she looked down at the head bent over her lap, so studiously lowered as if Elsie feared what her eyes might reveal.

"Why, Elsie, what is it?" asked Cynthia, her voice held a little note of fear in it. "Is there something you haven't told me yet?—are you married already?"

She put her hands on the other girl's shoulders and Elsie lifted her face, her eyes meeting Cynthia's, a little troubled but very steadfast.

"No," she said, "I am not married, I am not even going to be." She shook off Cynthia's hands and stood up. "Now you are shocked, even if you weren't before. It came as just a little surprise to me too when he explained things to me at first, but they are all good reasons—why he cannot marry, I mean—his people, his career, oh, everything." She paused and moved away over to the window. "And after all," she went on, turning to face Cynthia, "what does it matter? He is giving me all my heart was hungry for—does anything else count?—you know what we have always thought as to marriage."

"Yes," admitted Cynthia, she stood up too, her face aghast, cold horror at her heart; "but these were only thoughts, Elsie, not deeds: this is so different, it is——"

"Immoral, are you going to say?" asked Elsie, her voice rang scornful, "does marriage then make an immoral thing moral? I shouldn't have thought you would have held that doctrine, West."

"And I don't exactly," acknowledged Cynthia; she stood undecided for a second then moved quickly over to Elsie, putting her arms round her; "but I am frightened for you. Marriage makes things legal and safe, anyway. I don't want you to be hurt or broken on any sort of convention, Elsie."

"I won't be," the other girl answered. "You see I am so sure of him. When you really love any one you will understand how a girl feels when she knows she can trust life, honour, everything, to the man she loves."

"Yes, but ought he to ask it or take it?" questioned Cynthia, nearer the truth in all her blind ignorance than Elsie, so radiant in her knowledge. "Oh, I don't know, Elsie, but I am frightened for you, frightened. Don't go on with it, dear, give him up; even though he won't marry you he probably will marry some one else one of these days—have you ever thought of that?"

The figure in her arms stiffened and drew away. Elsie turned and walked towards her door, and with her hand on the handle she turned to Cynthia again.

"I have thought and thought and thought," she said. "Do you think I would do a thing like this without thinking?—but in the end it all comes to the same thing. He has only got to put a hand on mine and all the sense

in the world would not help me to say no to what he wants. There is something stronger than sense or a knowledge of what is right and wrong, and that is love. Besides, I am not afraid," she threw her head back proudly. "I wanted life, he has opened it to me. I wanted love, he has given it me. Don't try and argue with me, West, you know what an aggressive arguer I can be."

Her face turned suddenly to just delighted mischief. "And here is a bombshell for you," she said, "he is going to take me all the way to Paris for a week end next week, I have begged off two days from the office. Digest that information at your leisure, O fearful one !"

She disappeared into her own room, shutting the door behind her, and Cynthia turned to the window, her mind a wild jumble of thoughts.

What did life, right and wrong, moral and immoral, and above all, what did love really mean? Who was there who could help her in the unravelling of this riddle? Not the vague and indefinite God of her childhood, Who sat beyond the impassive face of the sky dispensing punishments and awards—mostly the former—to earth-bound sinners. Not the Deity that she had evolved for herself later on, the Divine undisturbed Essence of Immortality which—so she had taught herself to believe—lay behind all Being. Neither of these could offer any guidance on the subject, since the one taught of man as being born in sin, and the other remained unmoved by any passion. And for human knowledge on the subject, whom should she turn to?

To Mattie, far over the seas, whose weekly letter told of great anxieties and little pleasures, of a new baby just arrived, of a vacant place in her heart that longed to see her largest baby again? Cynthia turned unwillingly from Mattie's doctrine, Mattie who claimed that children were the only excuse for love; nor could she look back on Nina's teaching, and her cynical laughter at all that was holy. Nor even to Elsie, ardent, intoxicated Elsie, so eager for the joy of life that her eyes were all but blinded to its truths. All of these had had their share in setting the problem before Cynthia's eyes, but not one she found could help her to unravel it. Did the solution then lie only in her own heart, or—with a quick touch of impatience against her own thoughts Cynthia pushed aside the memory of Ted Hunter's face. His eyes, with all their unsaid messages, seemed to be staring into her heart, claiming that the truth should be brought forth; but she shut her eyes from the picture.

"It is ridiculous of me," she argued to herself, "he has no right to a place even in my thoughts. He is just some one whom I have been nice to because I am sorry for him, and he isn't even a gentleman."

This last conclusion was a deadly argument, she decided, against the pleading of his eyes, and she leaned out of the window to say a final good-night to the world before turning into bed and seeking sleep as a final solver of all problems. The mystery of life breathed round her outside, cat called to cat, birds stirred, sleeping close up against each other on the branches of the trees. Just outside the zone of light thrown by a street lamp

a couple stood held close together, the man's arms round the girl, while from a neighbouring public-house the sounds of a horrible quarrel held the air, the fierce scream of a drunken woman mixed with muttered curses, and hateful laughter.

Cynthia drew in her head with a little shiver and shut the window. It was all out there, the joy and sorrow, the hatred and love, the beauty and sordidness of life. What did it all mean ? Who was to teach her its lesson ? And again Ted Hunter's eyes looked out at her from the shadows.

CHAPTER XII

MISCONCEPTIONS

ELSIE'S weekend in Paris was the small beginning of the rift which slowly and surely widened between the two girls, breaking up a companionship which had lasted over a period of two years. How could it be otherwise? Elsie led two lives and Cynthia was of necessity shut out from the more important one. Before a month had passed, Elsie had moved into a small flat of her own, had left office and was living on money allowed her by the man; far more comfortably, Cynthia was bound to admit, than they had been able to live on their combined forces; whether more happily, she doubted sometimes.

Their friendship by no means lapsed entirely because of this break, and they still saw a great deal of each other. The man could only spend the weekends with Elsie, and sometimes a month would slip past without his coming; but he wrote every day; and Elsie lived on those letters and her replies, and his stray visits. Cynthia acted as

a safety valve for the times he could not come. She never met the man, and after the first curiosity to see him had passed, she was grateful, for she learnt to hate him with a passionate intensity she found difficult to conceal at times even from Elsie.

For herself she stayed on alone in White's Avenue; her allowance permitted her to keep up the flat on her own, and not for worlds would she have faced Mrs. Board's or any suchlike establishment again. White's Avenue remained Elsie's nominal address too, her letters came there, she kept her latchkey, the place was ready for her whenever she should care to come back. Her new flat, consisting of three fair-sized rooms, was on the top floor of one of the row of houses that stand opposite Whiteley's in Queen's Road. Daintily furnished, the little sitting-room a miniature drawing-room, with shaded pink lamps and soft cushions everywhere; the bedroom all white and so high up that from its window one could catch a side glimpse of the trees in the park. The third room was a bath-dressing-room, the bath being the one luxury which Cynthia envied Elsie.

"Every time I come here," she explained one evening, standing in the middle of the drawing-room and gazing round her ruthfully, "I think of how rotten it is having to boil three kettles in succession, while I do my hair and breakfast, and even then having only about two inches of hot water and an icy bath to sit down in. You are lucky in having that bath with the hot water laid on, Elsie."

"Only lucky in that?" asked the other girl; she lay back on the cushions of the sofa, her feet up on a neighbouring chair. The two windows were wide open and the late summer light of an August evening invaded the little room, a soft twilight which made everything it touched on beautiful. "Don't you envy me anything of all this?" She waved one hand round the room and picked up the frill of her silk wrap with the other.

Cynthia came out of her retrospective vision of baths taken endlessly in comfort and sighed. Her eyes followed the wave of Elsie's hand and rested finally on the girl herself. What had these last four months done to Elsie? They had turned her from a girl into a woman for one thing, and the eager questioning look had left her face. It would have fitted but ill with her new clothes, Cynthia concluded, soft colours and dainty laces and silks, for Elsie who had never, in Cynthia's knowledge of her, worn anything but Peter-Pan blouses and skirts, with rather a vivid taste in ties. Clothes change and make a woman so much; Elsie, in these new, expensive garments, was Elsie no longer. As she searched her mind for an answer to her friend's question the memory of their first meeting came back to Cynthia, and she saw just for a moment that vivid, eager, yet hopelessly bored face across the table of Mrs. Board's house. And all their times together since then, their walks, their arguments, their small, humble amusements, thronged her mind.

"Well," Elsie's voice broke in on her silence. "You

are staring at me, West, which you know is a thing I disapprove of, and you haven't answered my question."

"I was remembering," admitted Cynthia with a little laugh. She dropped into a favourite position of hers on the floor at Elsie's side. "Perhaps I was trying to find the old Elsie in the new, but she escapes me. Are you quite, quite happy, nowadays, Elsie?"

"Of course I am," the other answered; "what makes you ask such an odd question, when you have just been requested to envy me?"

"I don't know." Cynthia leant forward, her hands clasped round her knees. "You know when I first met you, Elsie, I used to think your face the hungriest I had ever seen. I don't mean hungry for material food," she explained at Elsie's movement of protest, "I mean hungry for what life was going to bring you, and now——"

"Well, now?" Elsie asked. She sat up straight. "Though I disapprove of these personal remarks, what is it that you now see in my face?"

Cynthia's seriousness was unbroken; she did not lift her eyes as she answered.

"Not altogether happiness," she said; "it seems to me as if the taste of life had not been nice in your mouth."

Elsie rose roughly and abruptly to her feet. "You are wrong," she said. Cynthia noticed that her hands were tightly clenched.

"Wrong. I am happy, so wildly happy, that at

times it leaves me tired—perhaps that is what you see. And then, when like now, he has to stay away all this long time—I haven't seen him for a fortnight, you know—I do get depressed. I want him so horribly badly that the need is almost physical pain. But even that can't rob me of the happiness once he has come back."

"To care so much, to have to do with so little, is that happiness?" asked Cynthia.

Elsie looked down at her and laughed. "You funny, placid old thing," she said, "of course it is. You mix up contentment and happiness in your mind, the one being a state of vegetable existence and the other the radiant glory of—well, not heavenly heaven, that has always sounded dull—but our heaven here on earth that we make for ourselves: Love. Now, by the way, to change the conversation, do you like my new tea-gown? No, wait a minute, you must see it in its full beauty."

She went across to the door and switched the lights on, turning round and round for Cynthia to admire the soft fall of her draperies, black crêpe de Chine, delicately embroidered with dream roses and their falling petals in the faintest shades of pink and green.

"It is lovely," Cynthia admitted—it was the third creation in very much the same style that she had seen Elsie wear. "Why don't you ever get a real evening dress?"

Elsie came back to the sofa: a shade of depression seemed to have fallen over her.

"He likes me best in these things," she explained. "He loves fussy garments and underclothes with ribbons run through them. I dressed up for him once in my new pyjamas, the ones I got at Swan & Edgars, two for 8s. 6d., do you remember, with blue and green lines on them sufficient to frighten a bird ten miles away: he nearly had a fit. It is awfully strange, West," she went on meditatively, "why he should have liked me at all. There have been such heaps of women in his life and always this kind." She patted the kimono. "He was worried with me at first because I didn't use scent or powder, or trouble about my hair or hands. It has taken me a long time to learn to be a woman, he says. Besides," she veered suddenly to the first question, "evening dresses wouldn't really be any use to me. You see in London we cannot go out to any of the swagger places, it wouldn't do if he was seen about with me."

Cynthia stared up at her, sudden indignation flaming in her eyes. "That is what I mean," she said, plunging to the heart of things, "when I ask you are you quite happy. Doesn't it hurt you sometimes that you should be a thing in his life of which he is ashamed? I couldn't bear it, it would break my happiness, roll it in the mud somehow, if everything had to be done in secret, hidden away, arranged for as if it were some crime."

"You are talking nonsense," Elsie answered. She drew herself a little away, and her face hardened. "You don't understand: it is not our love that is wrong. To love as we do, is to have known the great things

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of this world. To sin against men's stupid, petty laws, because we hold to a wider, bigger law, is fine. It does sometimes hurt me, as you say, though why you should want to drag my hurt into the light and stare at it I don't know, but I would rather be hurt by, and for love, than never have known it at all." She rose tempestuously and moved away.

Cynthia stood up. "I didn't mean to seem horrid, it was hateful of me, Elsie; perhaps it is a certain amount of jealousy, envy for what you feel, and I don't seem able to." She paused, but with the spirit of truth drawing her on she could not let it rest at that. "You are giving everything to him," she said, "and for him; that is love, even I can see that. But his share in it, which takes so much from you and makes no sacrifice in return, is that love?"

"Oh, for God's sake stop asking questions," Elsie answered roughly; then on a sudden she swayed round, her face working piteously. "Don't probe my joy to death, West: of course he loves me. Men's love is different to ours: but do you think I could bear life if I doubted his love?"

"He might marry you then," commented Cynthia, a little ashamed of her persistence, which yet had at the back of it a vain desire to help Elsie.

The other girl pulled herself together and from the intricacies of her garment produced a pocket-handkerchief with which she rubbed her nose fiercely.

"He can't marry me, that is all about it. We have looked at it from every side. He has his family to

think of : they would cut off every penny of his allowance if they heard of me, and I should not like him if he was poor. I don't want marriage with a poor man, I want life and love made pleasant by heaps of money. He is giving me what I want. If there is any sin in our living together as we do, then the sin is mine, not his ; please understand that, West, in future."

It all sounded very convincing, yet Cynthia doubted even the depth of the assertion, that is why she grew to hate the man. For the rest, Elsie had chosen her path, and she had undoubtedly to walk it alone.

Office life and 24, White's Avenue, when compared with Elsie's flat, her dainty clothes, her riotous weekends, and delirious happiness, appeared terribly monotonous. It must be admitted that for a time at least Cynthia did throw herself with a zest into the excitement that a flirtation with Ted Hunter afforded her. He was so different to the other men whom she had known before, and the very fact that from the start he appeared to accept the knowledge that she could never by any possibility care for a man like himself, liberated her in a sense from any responsibility. There was a delightful sense of freedom in her companionship with him, he worshipped as a rule dumbly, answering to all her moods with unfailing loyalty. Only very rarely, for the man had extraordinary powers of self-repression, did the worship suddenly blaze into a flame of passion, and always at those times, when he would stand before her shaken for the moment out of his game of pretence, all the wild longings and useless hopes of his heart in

his eyes, it was Cynthia who would draw back, face a little white, self-possession gone to the winds.

"Don't look at me like that," she would remonstrate in a voice that tried to appear amused, "it is positively terrifying."

And fear was truly enough in her heart, not fear of him, that was to her the awe-inspiring part, but fear of herself. Instinctively she knew that within herself was something that answered to his need, and had his silence failed him, had his lips spoken what his eyes said, no power on earth could have held her back from giving. She knew only vaguely that the man was not a gentleman in the accepted idea of the word; Cynthia, believing that she knew all about life, imagined that that fact alone was a sufficient guard to her heart. As if Love has ever, since the beginning of the world, paid much attention to the laws of caste or society.

Meanwhile she went to the theatre with him once or twice, and flirted assiduously with her own feelings and her power over his in their many hours of companionship. It needed only the match of jealousy or anger to let free the flame between them; that she did not know and he did his best to conceal.

It was more than fortunate for Cynthia that since she elected to play this dangerous game of make-belief the man she chose for the purpose should have been such a one as Ted Hunter. His whole life, and he was at this time a man of thirty-four, had been one of self-repression. He had worshipped his mother, and it was curious how the memory of her and her life stood now

between him and Cynthia, for Mrs. Hunter had not been at all happy in her married life. She had always been weak and delicate and quite incapable of struggling with the very hard portion of life which had been dealt out to them. Ted's father had been a shop-owner in a very small way, but long before his son's school days even the business had come to irretrievable ruin, and Ted's earliest recollections were of times of desperate poverty and of the knowledge of how his mother shrank and drew back from the hardships of their life. She had died very suddenly when Ted was sixteen. He had been fetched back one day from the office where he was serving his period of apprenticeship because she had been taken ill : and when he reached home she was already dead, the little frail hands laid one above the other, the eyelids closed over the soft grey eyes that had known so many tears. How she had cried, Ted had remembered that as he stood looking down at her, and boy as he was, he was able to thank God that she should have won out of it at last.

After that Ted had gone back to the office and donned his fetters again, hardly aware at first of how strongly he was binding himself down. If he had had any ambitions apart from life as a clerk he had had to lay them aside ; his father was old, whatever wages could be earned had to be set aside for his comfort. And the years came and went—it was fourteen years now since his mother had died. Her memory had become a faint far-off shadow and his fetters were upon him faster than ever.

Then Cynthia came into his life, Cynthia with the faint stirrings of womanhood just awake in her with her half-puzzled eyes and quaint outlook upon men and life. It was no riotous storm of love her coming, but day by day, hour by hour almost, he watched and noted and grew to love every small thing about her. Even the sound of her feet was known to him, he was aware of her presence in the room without turning to see her, or hearing her voice. And as the days grew into weeks, the weeks into months, her presence, the look in her eyes, the sound of her laugh, heard so very seldom across the other office noises, took complete possession of his heart and mind, all that had lain dormant in the man woke at her touch, and he loved her; with heart, body and soul, he loved her.

He never made any mistake about Cynthia's attitude towards himself. He knew that she was curious and interested, that she probed his feelings for the satisfaction of watching their effect upon herself. His only fear was that some day his self-control might snap under the strain she daily put upon it, and he was afraid that if she should by chance be made to see his great and mighty need for her, the knowledge would probably only horrify and disgust her.

Yet it was at times terrifically hard for him, for the man was only human, and Cynthia's absurd notions as to their friendship and what it admitted of, frequently pushed him to the edge of endurance.

"I can talk to you," she said one day, "as I have never been able to talk to any one else. I suppose it is

really because since Elsie has gone," (she had told him all about Elsie from the beginning), "I have no one else to talk to, and somehow I never stop to think of you as a man."

"No, I know you don't," Ted admitted; "none the less I am one, you know."

"Well, then, it must have something to do with you and I being friends, just because we can't ever be anything else." There were occasions when what she deemed prudence caused Cynthia to refer thus vaguely to the difference between them. "You see," she went on, "I always have thought a man would make the most perfect sort of friend a girl could have, provided there couldn't be any fear on the one side that he was being chased, and on the other that she thought that he thought that she was chasing. That sounds a little muddled, doesn't it, but you follow what I mean." She looked up at him, the smile dimpling her cheeks. "You couldn't think I was chasing you, could you?"

"No," admitted the man, his eyes did not meet hers.

"Well, then, that makes things nice and comfortable," explained Cynthia. "You and I can talk of things that most men and women won't discuss: we can be friends just as two men can be."

"No, we can't," contradicted the man, this time his eyes did meet hers, but he looked away again quickly, and his hands clenched on the back of the chair. "You are not a man, you see, and the theory of friendship between a man and a woman sounds nice, but it has very rarely been successful."

"That shows a lack of initiative on the part of the people who tried," announced Cynthia. "You are rather sentimentally inclined sometimes, I have noticed it." She nodded her head wisely and putting both hands on the typewriter leant a little towards him. "I believe," she said, "that you are one of those pre-historic men who admit women into their affections only. A man once said to me, 'I divide women into two classes : the ones I want to kiss and the ones I don't.' Now admit it, you have positively wanted to hold my hands sometimes, haven't you ?"

She had meant to say, "wanted to kiss me," but at the last moment her courage had failed, and annoyed as she was at the lack of bravado she could feel herself blushing.

Ted Hunter, however, kept his eyes rigorously lowered. "And supposing what you say is true ?" he asked.

"Why, it is ridiculous," laughed Cynthia. "Why want to hold my hand, why work yourself into believing that it makes you feel nice ? Can't you explain to me just why you want to, and then I can prove to you how silly it is."

"Can you," he lifted miserably hurt eyes, and at once Cynthia was ashamed of her laughter. "I am afraid your arguments would not help me very much. And anyway there isn't anything to tell—what could there be ?"

What could there be ? That was the fascinating lure of curiosity that kept Cynthia interested and perplexed. Sometimes she caught herself wishing that

he would show her more of what he felt, would lay rough hands on her, perhaps kiss her even. What would it feel like if he did ? Under pretended laughter she played with the idea, always drawing him forward, always meeting him with a stone wall of reserve when he advanced ; and all the time she did not realize in the least how great a traitor was springing up in her own heart, ready to hand over the keys of the citadel at the first excuse.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ENDING OF A DREAM

CYNTHIA had not heard or seen anything of Elsie for three weeks ; she had had a little note in the first instance to tell her that the man was to be in town for ten whole days, and it added that Elsie would let her know when he took his departure. Therefore Cynthia had no real reason for feeling nervous or depressed at the prolonged silence. Yet she undoubtedly was alarmed : perhaps Mr. Mathews more than anyone was directly responsible for the feeling. He met her on her return from office one evening towards the end of the third week, his long hair and moustache ruffled, his eyes blinking more than usual, and his face worried.

“ I have been in a trance, Miss Weston,” he informed her, “ and have you heard lately from Miss Hart ? ”

“ Not for some time,” Cynthia acknowledged, “ but she is quite all right—why do you ask ? ”

“ Because,” his eyes grew steady for a moment and

looked, as Cynthia always described it, straight through her and at something beyond and behind her. "There was trouble in the crystal, there always has been lately," his voice adopted a curious flatness, "I see trouble and danger all round her, and this time it touches you nearly as well." He came out of his vision with a jerk. "I am troubled in my mind," he admitted, "there is an evil influence gathering in this house: I am not sure that I ought not to ask you to leave."

"Are you trying to give me polite notice to quit?" laughed Cynthia; after all, Mathews was quite mad, and always having these trances; it was no use being alarmed by them.

"Not for myself," Mathews hastened to explain, nervous hands tugging at his hair; "but I don't trust this influence for you." He blinked at her.

"Oh, well, I'll risk it," answered Cynthia. "And now, perhaps, having thoroughly scared the life out of me with influences and evil floating things, you will come and sit in my room for a bit after supper. If there is an evil influence anywhere it is in that horrible mirror over the mantelpiece."

"You know why that is, don't you?" Mathews asked earnestly, his mind immediately turned to another subject. "It is because you are psychic, and all the spirits long to communicate with your spirit through the mirror, knowing it to be one of the means of communication. A mirror or a crystal serves their purpose equally well."

"But I don't wish to be psychic," remonstrated

Cynthia from halfway up the stairs, "it is very inconsiderate of them to push their unwanted selves upon me. I shall hang a towel over that mirror, that's all."

Which she did, but the mere blocking out of the mirror did not remove the troubled thoughts from her mind.

"What sort of danger did you see round Elsie?" she questioned Mr. Mathews later on in the evening, stopping him in the middle of a long discourse on how to build airships, which was his latest craze.

Brought up so suddenly in his subject, Mr. Mathews seemed a little vague.

"Nothing exactly," he admitted; "just trouble and danger and tears—oh, a lot of tears."

"Elsie doesn't cry," objected Cynthia. "You must have mixed me into the vision as well."

"No, I didn't," he asserted firmly; "they were her tears; she cried for something very precious that has been broken in her life."

"Oh, dear!" remonstrated Cynthia, "how gloomy you are. Let's get back to airships: how did you say you were going to make the wings go round?"

Mr. Mathews did not require a listener when once fairly embarked on a hobby. Cynthia heard his voice without listening to the words, darned her stockings, and worried out in her mind all the terrible things that might have happened to Elsie and that would account for her silence, until the sound of footsteps outside

caught her attention. Perhaps it was because her mind was so full of Elsie that she came at once to the conclusion that it was her friend; perhaps she did really recognize the footsteps; anyway, before the arrival had time to reach the landing or knock on the door, Cynthia had sprung to her feet, upsetting her work-basket and pile of mending, and bringing Mr. Mathews' harangue to a close in the process.

"It is Elsie," she whispered. "I am sure it is Elsie."

Mr. Mathews stood up too. Cynthia remembered afterwards the curious fact that neither of them went to the door to open it, they just stood where they were staring. The footsteps came a little draggingly up the last flight, paused at the door, and as the handle turned without any preliminary knock, Cynthia gave a gasp of certainty. Then the door opened and Elsie came into the room. She did not seem to notice Mathews, her eyes were only for Cynthia, and she stood for a second swaying against the door as if for support before she spoke.

"I have come back, West," she said. "I may seem a little drunk, but it is drunk with pain if anything. I have suffered such agonies, such horrible agonies, perhaps they will let me die now. I have come back." She moved from the door, staggered a few steps into the room and fell her length at their feet.

"It was what I saw in the crystal," Mathews was muttering, "pain and danger and tears. Poor girl, poor girl!" He pushed back his chair and stood un-

decided. Situations that required prompt handling always left Mathews dazed and unable to move.

Cynthia had run forward with a little cry of terror, and kneeling by the limp body of her friend, turned it face upwards, lifting the head and shoulders into her arms.

"It is only a faint," she said, "only a faint. Oh, what shall I do, what does one do to people who have fainted?"

"Put her head lower than her feet," suggested Mathews—the absolute crisis was beginning to pass, and he had had some knowledge of doctoring in his young days. "Unfasten her clothes, I will get some water and brandy and call Miss Powell to help you." He moved to the door.

"And a doctor," begged Cynthia. "Oh, fetch a doctor as quickly as ever you can."

"Miss Powell is a nurse," he answered. "Let us see what she says first. Perhaps a doctor won't be necessary."

Elsie came out of her faint before Mathews or Miss Powell, just wakened from a first sleep, and attired in a long austere looking dressing-gown, had time to arrive.

She opened her eyes on Cynthia's anxious face and attempted a faint smile, which was swept aside instantly by a spasm of pain. Cynthia had to stoop to hear the words which could hardly force themselves between the clenched teeth. "I must have something to take away the pain, West," Elsie whispered. "I can't bear

it any more. I have screamed till I can't make a sound, and bitten my hand till it bled, see,"—she tried to lift herself a little but fell back. "They must give me something to stop it, or I shall go mad, quite mad."

"Yes, dear, they shall," promised Cynthia. "I will make them," she said fiercely, as if facing unlimited opposition on the subject.

Cynthia and Mathews, under Miss Powell's directions, carried Elsie into the front room and laid her on the bed, and then, Mathews having taken himself off, the two women proceeded to undress her and get her into some night clothes as quickly and gently as possible.

"Can't I go and fetch a doctor?" Cynthia begged. "She ought to have morphia, or something that would ease the pain a little. I don't know what is wrong with her, but she seems to be suffering most horribly."

Elsie heard the whispered words. "Not a doctor." She caught at Miss Powell's hand. "You can give me something without sending for a doctor, can't you? Besides, the pain is a little better now; if I lie quite still I can bear it."

"I can inject a little morphia if necessary," Miss Powell answered Cynthia's questions. "I think we had better leave it at that." Her long, hatchet-like face was very grave and stern, Cynthia thought. "Will you go into the next room and leave me alone with your friend for a little. You can trust her to me," she added kindly, the softness of her eyes taking away from the sternness of her face. "I will not let her

suffer more than can be helped. Make a little coffee for us and heat some milk for her," she suggested, knowing that labour, however trivial, would help Cynthia in her time of waiting.

How long the questions and answers seemed, it appeared to Cynthia that she had waited for hours in the outer room, and the milk and the coffee had been heated up twice, before the door opened and Miss Powell came out, shutting it gently behind her.

"I have given her some morphia," she said, "it will help her to sleep." She sank wearily into a chair by the table and leant her head on her hands.

"And is she all right?" asked Cynthia, nervous fear gripping at her heart. "Hadn't we better fetch a doctor to see her?"

"No need," answered Miss Powell. She lifted her head a moment. "She has come through the worst of it now."

"But——" began Cynthia, but Miss Powell interrupted.

"You want to know what is the cause of it, don't you?" she asked, sitting erect and stiff in her ridiculous looking garment. "It might perhaps be described as the end of an attempt on the part of one girl to fling herself against the bulwarks of civilization and pull away the corner stone. Whenever a woman goes against the laws she ends in disaster." She stood up and moved across to where Cynthia was sitting looking undeniably bewildered by the tirade. "Am I talking in riddles to you, child? Yet you are one of

Miss Shaw's most ardent followers, I have seen your face glow while you listened to her speeches. Freedom for women, is that not one of your war cries. Well, your friend," she looked up at the door of Elsie's bedroom, "claimed and took her right of freedom from men's conventions; the laws of Nature have proved a more unbreakable barrier, that is all."

"But it isn't fair," remonstrated Cynthia. Crowds of arguments thronged her mind; under Miss Powell's grave eyes they withered away even before they could be put into words.

"The unfairness begins then with birth," the older woman answered. "It is not fair that we should be born women."

"But because Elsie loved this man and went to live with him without being married to him, do you say she has committed a crime which deserves punishment from Nature," Cynthia argued. "A marriage service doesn't make something moral and right which, without it, is a crime against Nature. Is it wrong to love, then: must it all be a question of law?"

Miss Powell drew herself up, an oddly impressive figure. "Elsie has done more than just sin against conventions," she said, "she has sinned against Nature and Love itself; that is where she breaks herself against unbreakable laws."

She did not divulge anything further as to Elsie's illness and Cynthia was left to surmise vaguely and put together her own small gleanings of knowledge as to what it might mean until such time as Elsie herself took

her into her confidence. For a week the girl lay without speaking on her bed in the front room, as if tired out, spending a great portion of the time in sleep. Miss Powell did day nurse work while Cynthia was at the office, and at night, though Cynthia was more than willing to do her share, Elsie seemed to want for nothing, hardly ever stirring from the one position, lying flat on her back, her hands by her sides. The only events of the day in which she took any interest were the postman's periodical visits. She seemed to lie with her ears straining for the sound of his feet and before he had had time to knock even she would call out to Cynthia or Miss Powell.

"That is the post: do see if there is a letter for me."

But apart from her father's weekly budget which came every Friday, accompanied by the Parish Magazine, no letters were handed in for her.

"She is waiting for the man to write to her," thought Cynthia, and every time she had to see the eager hope in Elsie's eyes fade to disappointment at the report of no letters, her hate against the man intensified.

One Saturday morning, a fortnight after her arrival, Elsie asked Cynthia if she would mind going over to the flat in Queen's road and seeing whether any message or note had been left there.

"Perhaps he didn't expect me to leave as I did," she explained, mentioning the man for the first time since her return. "He may have been angry when he came back and found me gone."

Cynthia went on her way back from office and found the flat deserted and untidy; evidently nothing had been touched since Elsie's abrupt departure. The landlady, a disreputable person, who resided in the basement, and whom Cynthia in her weekly visits had never seen quite sober, would vouchsafe no information, barring the fact that the gentleman, who had always been very pleasant and well spoken to her, had called on the day after the young lady had left and had taken away his boxes with him, not touching any of the young lady's possessions and prepaying the rent of the flat for the next three months. There was also one large business-like looking letter addressed to Elsie in the rack of the hall.

Cynthia took it home with her, heavy hearted. Elsie's small flat, that had been so dainty a dwelling-place, seemed, in its present state of dirt and confusion, tawdry and draggled, while the half-sober woman, with her degraded face and thinly veiled allusions, added a touch of sordidness to the whole scene. Was this how Elsie's rapturous romance was to end? If so, it was only another instance of the horror that lay behind all the seeming glamour of life.

Cynthia found on her return to the flat that Elsie had struggled out of bed and dressed herself; she had even started the making of tea.

"It was only laziness that was keeping me in bed," she explained. "Miss Powell pointed that out to me this morning. Were there any letters for me?"

"Only this one," Cynthia held out the uninteresting

looking epistle. "And the landlady could only tell me that he had paid your rent for you for the next three months, and taken away a box belonging to him, or something."

Elsie took the letter in her hand, all expression wiped from her face; she was just staring blankly at the opposite wall.

"It is the end, I suppose," she said. Cynthia realized that she was quite unnoticed. Elsie was living in a blank, dreadful world of her own. "The end," she repeated. The unopened letter fell from her hands, and she put them up as if to hide her eyes from the light in the room. "How am I going to live?" she whispered.

Cynthia moved to her impetuously, throwing her arms round her, drawing the shaking form close up against her own.

"Don't feel like that, Elsie," she begged, "tell me about things, dear: it will help you if you can only talk about the trouble. You are bearing it all alone now: won't you let me help you?"

Elsie drew herself a little away, but she let her hands stay in Cynthia's. "There isn't much to tell," she said. "I wonder if you will look at me as Miss Powell does when you know." She dropped Cynthia's hands and picked up the letter. "Let's see what is in this first," she said. The steady indifference of her voice frightened Cynthia more than any breakdown would have done. "And then I will tell you all about the ending of my dream; there is an excellent moral to be

gained from the story ; Miss Powell will no doubt tell you."

She laughed a little and moving over to the table sat down, opening the letter and spreading it out before her. Cynthia watched her reading it, watched the set calm of her face flame for one moment into vivid anger, saw the eyes close quickly, as if on unwilling tears, and the mouth shut tight. Then, the storm past, Elsie's face became a mask again, only her hands shook a little as she tore the letter and its contents into shreds.

Then she turned to Cynthia. "It is the last milestone gone," she said, her eyes bright and defiant. "This was a letter"—she held the pieces up and let them flutter to the floor—"from his lawyers, paying me my first quarterly allowance. I have torn the note up with the letter, which was stupid of me ; it would have been better to have sent it back." She rose and walked over to the window. "Are you ready for my discourse, West ? It is not all nice ; like most of the real things of this world, parts of it are excessively horrible."

"Don't tell me if it hurts to speak of it," answered Cynthia. Her eyes as if fascinated stayed on the stray fragments of the letter that lay about the floor. "I only asked because I hoped it might help you to face things, and I cannot bear to see you suffer as you have suffered, Elsie, as you are suffering. I don't just mean the physical pain you have had to bear, I mean the dreadful hurt that lies behind your eyes, and

that shows only when you think no one is looking at you."

"Funny, sentimental old West." Elsie's lips smiled as she turned to face her. "And yet, you are right," she acknowledged. "I have been hurt. Do you know, West, I have cried—I, who all my life have despised tears, have cried, and cried, and cried, until now there is nothing left in me to feel hurt any longer. That is why I can talk about it now, without making what is usually described as a fuss."

She came back to the table and sat down, propping her head on her hands. "You know I wrote to you telling you that he was coming up to spend a whole week with me; I don't know whether you gathered from my letter what an idiotic state of bliss I was in. Well, he came. I had so much to tell him, was so wrapped up in the wonderful knowledge that had dawned in my heart, and which still had to be imparted to him—I suppose you know, don't you, that I was to have had a baby—that for two days I played with the idea of telling him, so entirely engrossed that I failed to notice that he himself was a little upset and unlike his usual self. Then on the third day we went out together in the morning; I was to have my hair shampooed while he called at his club for news and letters. They gave me one of those senseless ladies' pictorials to read at the hairdresser's while my hair was drying, and paying very little attention to the letterpress I turned over the pages till suddenly his picture, arrayed in the full glory of his uniform, arrested my attention."

She paused a moment and pushed the hair back from her face.

"When I shut my eyes at nights now to try and sleep, that page—his pictured face and that of the girl's photograph artistically arranged next him—dances before them, and the letters run into each other till my brain aches with trying to get them in the right order. I can't get the proper wording, but it was something to this effect: 'A marriage has been arranged and will shortly be celebrated between—a name that I knew to be his—and Rosamund Taylor.' Rosamund is a pretty name, isn't it? Then the man came back to dress my hair and I shut the paper up and laid it away. Even then I wasn't very alarmed or agitated; there was some mistake I supposed, and in any case would not my news alter everything? We drove back to the flat in a taxi; he had a pile of letters he had collected at the club, and he hadn't finished reading them when we reached home, so I left him in the front room and went into the other to change and do my hair, you know how awful hairdressers make your hair look after a shampoo. I don't know why—perhaps it was some premonition, perhaps that paper had really in a way upset me—but I found myself tongue-tied and stupid for the rest of the day. I could not talk of serious things; we bubbled inanities all the afternoon, went out to tea, walked through the park, talked of the weather and so forth, almost like two strangers. But that evening, with the lights lit and the curtains drawn so that the outside noises of the street hardly reached us at

all, I gathered my courage together and told him my secret. His face went white and angry, West, and he rose from where he had been sitting beside me, pushing away my hands.

“‘Are you quite sure about it?’ he said. ‘It is a most infernal nuisance and it must be stopped at once.’

“I suppose my face showed all my horror. If he had suddenly hit me across the face, I could not have been more frightened and surprised, for he came back to me, and sitting down pulled me into his arms. He kept the anger from his voice, but it was still in his eyes, and all of a sudden I knew that what I had seen in the paper was true, and hundreds of suspicions clamoured to be heard in my brain.

“‘You see, darling,’ he explained, ‘we cannot possibly dream of starting a family in a *ménage* like ours; it is a damned serious thing to do, and sooner or later we are bound to be found out. And we don’t want a third in our heaven, do we, darling?’

“He tilted up my face and tried to kiss me, but I wriggled away.

“‘I thought you would be pleased,’ I managed to whisper.

“‘Well, I am not,’ he answered: ‘I want you, and you alone.’

“He drew back my head and kissed me—this time I didn’t resist—kissed me till the rest of the world swam into oblivion and nothing existed or mattered, except him. And all the time he argued and explained and

pleaded. Oh, Cynthia, don't blame me that I gave way; don't look at me as Miss Powell does, with murder-
eas written all over your face."

"Why should I?" asked Cynthia. She slid to her knees by Elsie, putting her arms round the girl, pressing her face to the other's. "I don't quite understand, dear, what it was you did. Miss Powell did not explain, but whatever it was it couldn't make you anything like that in my eyes."

"I was forgetting that you wouldn't understand," admitted Elsie. She sat staring in front of her. "There is that excuse for me, too, I didn't really understand. Yet I knew instinctively that what he wanted me to do was wrong. Oh, yes, quite instinctively I knew that, and I agreed to do it; that, perhaps, is where my sin comes in."

She stood up abruptly. "I don't want to open your eyes to all the horror I went through, West. Hundreds of women live and die without knowing it, and there is no reason why you shouldn't be one of them, but, having come so far, I must tell you some of it. He brought some one who called himself a doctor to see me next day. Then—everything is rather vague after that—a great nightmare of horror and pain and fright, and alongside of it all the time crept the knowledge that despite my complaisance I had lost him. He couldn't bear to see me suffer, he said. I bit my hand through, as I showed you, to stop the crying, so that it should not worry him, but even then he would not stay. At last, in a fit of frenzy, I taxed him with what I had seen

in the papers, and he acknowledged it to be true—a marriage forced upon him by his people, one that would in no way affect us. Lies, hundreds of them, plausible, smooth lies, till I screamed at him to go, go and leave me alone with my agony.” All life had left her voice ; it was dull and toneless. “I shall never see him again, West. Do you remember those lines Miss Shaw is so fond of quoting about women?—

‘Because she asked for truth, God gave
All the world’s anguish and the grave.’”

She knelt on the floor, gathering together the fragments of her letter. “If he had only written himself,” Cynthia could hear her whisper. Then to her relief, because otherwise it seemed to her Elsie would go mad, the kneeling form swayed, crouched down with hands covering its face, and a passion of merciful tears shook the girl.

Here was something, anyway, that sympathy could help. Cynthia ran to her friend and gathered her into her arms, so that the two of them sat on the floor together, and Elsie’s tempest of grief vented itself against the shelter of Cynthia’s heart.

CHAPTER XIV

CYNTHIA MEETS CLENNELL AGAIN

ELSIE passed through a whole gamut of despair in the months that followed, changing from cold anger against the man, to passionate, hopeless longing for his presence. Wild tempests of tears shook her. For days on end sullen discontent held her ; she was ill, nerve-ridden, inexpressibly difficult to get on with. Cynthia struggled manfully ; she was sympathetic through the tears, anxious to smooth matters over the discontent, eager to foster the small glimmerings of rage that showed very occasionally in Elsie's mind against the man.

"I don't understand you a little bit, Elsie," she ventured one evening, having arrived home to find Elsie white-faced and red-eyed. "If any one had treated me as this man has treated you, I should hate him so fiercely that it would swallow up every other feeling."

"I can't," answered Elsie : "don't think I haven't tried. Do you think it doesn't make me sick with

shame to see myself being such an idiot ? But I can't get away from loving him ; I want him—to see him—to feel him. What is the use of your talking about hating any one, West. You haven't known what it is to love yet."

"I am almost glad I haven't," admitted Cynthia ; "it hasn't brought you very much happiness, has it ?"

"But I was happy," contradicted Elsie. She moved and sat listlessly at the supper-table, making but a poor pretence at eating, while Cynthia watched her with an anxious face.

"Do eat something, Elsie," she begged, when even a savoury omelette, Elsie's favourite dish, had been pushed aside scarcely touched. "It is disheartening cooking for you these days."

Elsie glanced up, a little contrition on her face ; also she pulled her plate back again, and started to eat some more, but obviously it was an effort.

"West," she said suddenly, giving up the pretence of eating and pushing back her chair, "I have found out where he lives, and I want to go and see him. Perhaps it is all a mistake ; perhaps he will come back when he knows how much I want him ; I was mad with pain and resentment that day when I screamed at him to go ; it is only right he should have been angry about it. If I could only see him, explain to him."

Cynthia stared at her. "You would never do that, would you, Elsie ?" she asked, unable to keep the disapproval out of her voice.

"Why not ?" the other answered fiercely. "Pride, do

you mean. Do you think I have any pride left? I want him : nothing else counts."

"But he has had your address all this time. If he loved you, if there was a mistake, he could have written or come. Oh, don't go, Elsie, please don't go. It will only hurt you, and humiliate you still more."

"I am going, none the less," Elsie answered. She rose. "I think I will go now, this very minute; it isn't late, and I haven't made too great a fright of myself, have I? Such is the depth of my degradation, West,"—the smile that stirred on her face was very bitter—"that I have positively purchased a new hat. Don't try to stop me, please." She held out her hands as Cynthia pushed back her chair and rose also. "I must know, I must find out for myself, and as soon as I see him I shall know. Then, if life is really going to settle down to this horrible nightmare, I will give you my word to try and accept it; at least, I will never speak of him again, that I can promise."

Cynthia stood watching her. The mention of the new hat had made her ready to weep. "Will you let me come with you?" she asked.

Elsie looked away from her out of the window; her face was ghastly, white and drawn. "I would rather have gone alone," she began; then she veered round quickly: "You have been such a brick to me, West, so patient and long suffering with my various moods; if you are really keen on seeing the last act of the tragedy, come; at any rate you will be able to bring home the pieces if it is

defeat." She laughed, but Cynthia flinched at the sound of the laughter.

Their destination being Victoria Street, the two girls walked to the end of their road and caught a Victoria-bound 'bus at the corner. The journey was passed in silence, Elsie sitting erect and stiff, hands clenched on her lap, the colour flaming to her face by now, her eyes dilated : Cynthia, in the corner seat, watching the traffic outside, her thoughts miserably set on a fervent wish that the painful interview was over and done with. Half-way up Victoria Street Elsie signed to Cynthia to get out and, still in silence, conducted her up a little side street, stopping outside a massive building of flats.

"We will have to go in here, I think, and ask the porter which is his flat," she said. "Are you sure you want to come any further, West. You can go home from here, or wait for me outside, if you would prefer it."

"I would rather come in," answered Cynthia. "Supposing any one else is there, it will look better."

She did not catch the name Elsie said to the porter : she was only painfully aware that the man regarded them with amused suspicion, and she felt her cheeks burning under the knowledge of what he was probably thinking.

The man conducted them to a door on the fourth landing. "That's it, ladies," he said; "think the gentleman's at home but I will keep the lift up till I see you get in, in case he isn't."

A polite, surprised man-servant opened the door to them, and informed them that his master was in, but that it would hardly be convenient for him to see them unless

their mission was very important, as he was giving a dinner party. But Elsie was firm.

"Will you take that to him, please," she said, writing her name on a piece of paper, folding it up, and handing it to the man. "We will wait for a message, anyway."

"Very well, miss"—the man's tone was hatefully supercilious—"step in here, please; I will tell the master."

He showed them into a tiny room on the left of the hall, switched on the lights and left, closing the door behind him. The place was evidently a study, at least a writing-room. A big desk, half shut, occupied the space in front of the window; a bookshelf ran across one side; hunting pictures and drawings of beautiful ladies, with next to nothing on, adorned the walls. There were three chairs in the room—two capacious armchairs by the fire, and one uncompromising stiff one at the table.

Cynthia selected this and sat down; Elsie moved about the room from picture to picture. She was in a corner of the room to the right of the door when it opened, and for a moment the incomer saw only Cynthia's figure in the room: Cynthia, who sat with wide accusing eyes, and frightened face, staring at him and unable to move from her chair.

Clennel had not altered very much since the days when they had been engaged. Perhaps the lines of his face were a little coarser, his mouth a little more dangerously indicative of self. His glance met Cynthia's and stayed on it; his face had gone white, his mouth set hard, giving him a curiously stubborn and cruel expression. As if he would

have spoken he took a quick step towards her, but, Cynthia had risen and moved backwards, almost pushing the chair between them, and her eyes deserted his and found Elsie. The man, perhaps, followed their meaning, for he turned abruptly on his heel and faced the other girl.

Now that the great moment had come, courage, resolution, desire even, seemed to have failed Elsie. She stood hands back against the wall, all colour drained from her face, her eyes lowered, so that the man's half-pitying glance escaped her. The new hat was a little at the wrong angle, the bottom of her blue serge skirt had sagged and frayed round the edges, her shoes were worn and needed a brush. All this his calm eyes scrutinized; then he shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly. Cynthia saw the action and her whole heart boiled with rage against the man, who advanced to Elsie, hand held out.

"Hullo, Miss Hart"—his voice was boisterously easy—"what brings you here? Is it anything I can do for you?"

Elsie lifted her head and looked at him. The hope in her heart, so faint and fragile a flower, had withered even at the first sound of his voice, the agony of its death was written in her face. She did not hold out her hand in response to his, only her glance searched his eyes, looked deeper still, as if she wanted to find the very soul behind his cultivated exterior. And the man's eyes fell before hers, while the hot blood mounted to his face.

Cynthia stood watching, her hands clutching at her chair, all her heart seething with indignation and clamouring to help Elsie through this hour of bitterness. She had her own hurt to struggle with too, but that could be

assuaged with anger. When she had thought of Clennel lately, it had been with a certain amount of compassionate understanding ; he had loved her, she was beginning to realize that, and she had not dealt very fairly with him. Once or twice she had even pondered over his whereabouts and wondered vaguely if he had met some nice girl who could give him love for love ; she had hoped, in fact, that he was happy. Now, all these thoughts helped to fan the flame of hate and contempt that blazed in her mind against him ; he had always been this kind of man, then : her anger took no thought of the share she herself had had in the moulding of him. Then the man, breaking an unpleasant pause, turned to Cynthia :

"You must be Miss Weston," he said with sublime effrontery. "Miss Hart has often mentioned you to me. We have not been introduced, but I have heard so much about you that I feel I know you. I wish you had thought of coming yesterday or to-morrow," he went on, speaking to Elsie again. "Then I could have asked you to dinner ; to-night, unfortunately, I have some very rowdy guests dining with me, I——"

Elsie interrupted him ; pride or something had come to her aid, her voice was clear, perhaps even a little scornful.

"Thank you," she said, and she moved across the room to Cynthia's side. "We would not have stayed to dinner. I came here to-night," her eyes lingered on the man for one moment, "to ask you a question ; you have answered it before I put it even." She turned her back on him. "Shall we go home, Cynthia ?" she asked.

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The man stood like a graven image, and watched them go. His eyes met Cynthia's just as she turned at the door for a final look at him ; she hoped he was able to read in them all the scorn she felt.

Outside in the dark, deserted street, Cynthia tried to slip a hand into Elsie's, but the girl drew herself away.

"Don't touch me or sympathize, please, West," she said, her voice abrupt and frigid. "I want to be left alone, and will you go home in the 'bus and leave me to walk by myself? I won't be much later than you, and I must be by myself for a little."

"Let me walk with you," begged Cynthia; "I won't speak to you, or worry you in any way."

"No," answered Elsie, "I must be alone. Please, please let me have my own way in this. Oh, I am not going to do exciting things, like suicide; if that is what is worrying you, I can promise you that."

"Very well," acquiesced Cynthia meekly.

She climbed into the 'bus and journeyed home alone, miserably aware of how the greatest of friendships can fail to comfort or make up for the loss of love.

The evening's pilgrimage was never referred to between the two girls again; Elsie apparently put her dream behind her and ignored it; at least there were no more tears, no more wild passionate railings against life, and Cynthia had made up her mind that she herself would not refer to Clennel again nor divulge her knowledge of him. It would only hurt Elsie the more, she thought, for she had often told Elsie of Clennel and how much he had wanted her to marry him. So the matter was more than

ever ignored between them and Clennel's name and personality dropped back into the shadowland of Cynthia's memory. Sometimes, Cynthia thought, that with the same strength of will with which she crushed all symptoms of regret, Elsie smothered all laughter and enjoyment in her heart. Nothing amused or interested her. She went with Cynthia, as of old, to the theatres, for walks, for motor-'bus drives down into all the old parts of London, but the happy spirit of companionship had gone from between them. It was a strange, new, silent Elsie that lived in the little flat, and sometimes her very presence depressed Cynthia to the verge of tears. After about a fortnight of tramping from registry office to office, the girl secured a post down in the city again; a small dingy office, badly lit and ventilated, where for 25s. a week she did all the correspondence and typing work of an oily Jew solicitor. She did her work with machine-like regularity; Cynthia, in her Grafton Street office, with its wide, spacious rooms, and the coming and going of customers all day, had no conception of the drudgery, the stifling sameness, of Elsie's days.

Was it any wonder that, behind the seeming indifference of the girl's face, a wild spirit of revolt seethed and gathered strength, anguish and fierce resentment combining to form a force which was one day to drive Elsie outside Cynthia's sphere of life altogether, on to the rocks of despair themselves. Not yet awhile; for the present her whole being was numbed and apathetic: physically and mentally she was worn out. The days were a weariness to her: nightly she

prayed for death and gained instead only sufficient sleep to fit her for another day's work. Was this to be her life till the end of time, was she to rest content with this, she, who had had the golden apple of the world held to her lips, whose mouth was still conscious of its faint sweet flavour? Like the younger sister in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, Elsie's heart and lips clamoured for more of the sweet-tasting fruit, whose juice turns to wormwood and gall in the veins; and, unknown even to herself, her feet had taken the first step towards so-called Vice, the doorway to which is so often portalled with what we deemed was Love.

CHAPTER XV

SPRING

SPRING dawned slowly in London that year. The winter had been a long and severe one; even April was a month of fierce, gusty winds and hailstorms, but with the coming of May the cold spell broke, and Spring took possession of the world. Grim, dirty, smoke-laden London woke up one morning to find Spring not only at her gates, but invading her very heart. Wide splashes of splendid yellow danced in all the squares and gardens, gay nodding daffodils decked the parks, the almond trees unfolded their delicate pink blossoms against the faintest and dimmest of blue skies. Spring is no riotous invader of London; nowhere in the world is her arrival more stealthily sweet and unawares, and the very delicacy of her presence seems to lend a glamour to the sun's rays; they touch grey houses and streets with fairy fingers, transforming them into something soft and lovely.

The spirits of Love and Spring go hand in hand; it is in Spring that—

"Youth calls to youth, the wide world over,
Like wind to lea, like bee to clover."

Cynthia, for no particular reason, except just that she was young with the rest of the world, developed a feeling of most ridiculous happiness during these May days. The flowers in the parks, the blue skies, the gaily dressed shop-windows, all filled her with the same feeling of elation. Snatches of songs were for ever on her lips, happiness bubbled into laughter at the slightest excuse. She was glad to be alive, glad to be in London, glad about every single thing in her existence. All this naturally blinded her to the state of fierce despair which had taken possession of Elsie. Happiness is not really sympathetic: to be touched by sorrow we need to have a grief of our own. Cynthia, because Elsie's lips were silent, hoped that the wound was healing, believed even that the new happiness of flower and bird and beast would help to heal it. And Elsie was very silent; the days of her wild outbursts against Fate were over, and she kept quiet now. Only her eyes were for ever sullen, even when her lips smiled.

Perhaps Miss Powell was the only one of all her companions to see any danger behind Elsie's apathy. Stern, grey-haired old lady as she was, her heart ached, even when she most disapproved of the girl; she had some faint inkling of the struggle that might be going on in Elsie's heart, because for one thing she had come in contact with every kind of life in her hospital career, and, for another, she had learnt to know that luxury

is a thing that eats into the life of people until the want of it becomes unbearable. Passion, she acknowledged to herself sometimes with a frown, is a force as strong and as mighty almost as love. She knew Elsie's home life, for of late she had taken to spending a great many of her evenings with the two girls; she guessed, too, at the hours in office, the dreary monotony, the everlasting grind of Elsie's days. It must all seem so hopelessly unpalatable to the girl whose passion had for a short time been awakened and satisfied with the glamour of life and wealth. But Miss Powell's knowledge was of no more use to her in giving help to Elsie than Cynthia's bubbling cheerfulness.

"Would you not be better, dear," she ventured once in speaking to Elsie, "away from all these old surroundings? Spring is so beautiful in the country; don't you feel you would like it?"

But Elsie shook her head; it sometimes seemed as if she resented any effort made to help her. "No," she answered, "if you want to know, home and Spring in the country would turn me into a raving lunatic in five minutes. Not that that would matter very much, only it would be bad luck on the dad selecting his house for such an event. It would be cheaper to die." She turned away, but Miss Powell put a gentle hand on her arm.

"Death often seems the easiest way, but if we want him very much he is certain to escape us," she said. "Our instinct is to live, you see."

"That is just it," answered Elsie. She turned, her face aflame with passionate indignation. "And is this life?" Her eyes swept round the room and rested on Cynthia's figure busily engaged in dishing up supper in their diminutive kitchen. "My instinct is to live too," she ended, but the veil had fallen over her eyes again, the feeling had died from her face, leaving it sullen and indifferent.

"What will you do when the sister comes home?" Elsie asked Cynthia on another occasion. "She will be home this summer, won't she?—will you give up the flat and go back to your proper sphere for a bit?"

Cynthia looked up. "I don't suppose so," she answered, a little surprised at the question. "This is my proper sphere, anyway, and there will still be you: we stand and fall together with the flat, don't we?" She laughed, her eyes meeting Elsie's for the moment.

"I don't want you to feel that," Elsie argued—her face flushed and the colour died away slowly—"I want you to go back and leave all this, if the sister asks you. It is not your sphere, and as for me, I don't think I shall stay much longer; sometimes I feel as if I couldn't bear it for another hour." Her hands clenched together on her lap, she bent her head over them.

"Are you still wanting him?" asked Cynthia, her voice subdued to a proper level of sympathy.

Elsie lifted her head. "No," she said, her words hard and defiant, "I buried all that kind of feeling

months ago, it is not him I want now, it is excitement, pleasure, money. One doesn't get much of any of those on 25s. a week, with office from nine to six."

"But what will you do?" asked Cynthia. "Where will you go? What sort of work will you find to give you pleasure, excitement, money?"

Elsie's eyes stared at her for a moment, then she rose abruptly, tidying away her work with rough hands.

"I don't know," she said, "and anyway does it matter? We have each of us to find our own way through life, West; we can't walk hand-in-hand with any one."

"You are going away, then?" asked Cynthia. Of late she had felt at times as if the flat, their life together, her very cheerfulness, had got on Elsie's nerves. The depression of the thought sounded in her voice, but Elsie did not seem to notice it.

"I don't know," she answered again; "but anyway I am not to be counted on, and that is why I want you to arrange with your sister if you feel inclined to."

"I see," agreed Cynthia. She felt as if her love had become something tangible, and as if Elsie had gathered it together and flung it back in her face. The blow tingled, and she could find no words to plead against the other's indifference. But even if Elsie did go, if the flat had to be given up, could she go back to what Elsie had alluded to as her proper sphere. What of Ted. Which life was really hers? She did not need to put the question into words, it

clamoured loudly enough in her heart, and the answer was not very far off.

"Don't you think, Miss Weston," asked Miss Richards a day or two later, pausing in her work and studying Cynthia's bent head, "that it is very ridiculous the way waiters at these smart restaurants and places get themselves up to look exactly like gentlemen?"

"Why?" asked Cynthia.

"Well it makes it so difficult to recognize the difference between them and the guests," Miss Richards explained as she leant back in her chair. "Did I tell you about the dance I was at the other evening?"

"Not yet," acknowledged Cynthia with a smile. Behind Miss Richards' immaculately dressed head of hair she could see the two little apprentice girls, and gathered from their expressions that the account had already held the office spellbound once or twice. Miss Richards worried a story to death, and sometimes Cynthia was moved to wonder what on earth a family of Richards all gathered together for the evening meal and all anxious to recount the various happenings of the day could be like. Her pencil strayed aimlessly from etching in a profile of one of the girl's heads to an exact reproduction of the reception-room mantelpiece, while Miss Richards, uninterrupted, and for the time being absolutely happy, went over the events of the evening. It was such a characteristic jumble of "Then I said," or "I thought," or "It did make me laugh," that it was practically unnecessary to listen

and Cynthia was roused from a vague dream of Miss Richards at a dance where all the men probably wore red pocket-handkerchiefs tucked into their waistcoats and white cotton gloves, to a realization that the flow of conversation had dwindled down to a question.

"We were wondering if you would," Miss Richards was asking.

"If I would what?" Cynthia was forced to question.

One of the girls at the back tittered, it was common knowledge in the firm that no one listened more than was necessary to Miss Richards.

"If you would join our little party next time," explained Miss Richards. "They are really great sport, these dances. We each bring our own man, so there is no trouble about partners."

"It is awfully kind of you," said Cynthia hurriedly, "but I am afraid I shouldn't be of any use, I don't know any men at all."

"Why not ask Mr. Hunter?" Miss Richards suggested—she picked up the work she had been engaged on before the dance had come into her mind—"He would jump at the chance of going anywhere with you."

Cynthia felt, and knew that she probably looked, annoyed. "I should hardly care to ask him," she answered.

"Oh, well, just as you like," agreed Miss Richards. "Only thought I would suggest it; we might have made a jolly party: Mr. Townsend is coming too. I

think you might say to this woman," she turned to one of the apprentices, "that we have received her orders with many thanks, and note what she requires." She slapped the letter down and stood up. "That is all the orders for to-day," she said. "You really won't think of asking Mr. Hunter?"

"I think not," answered Cynthia. "I am not awfully keen on dancing myself," she added. The vision of red pocket-handkerchiefs and white cotton gloves flashed across her mind again.

"It is Miss Richards who wants Mr. Hunter," little Miss Duke ventured, once Miss Richards' figure had vanished through the reception-room door. "She has been trying to catch Mr. Hunter ever since she came here. She says he has got divine eyes."

"Does she?" said Cynthia. She gathered her papers together preparatory to going to her own room, and getting the letters typed. "Why doesn't she ask him herself, then? She knows him as well as I do."

The other apprentice, a slight, pretty girl, with eyes like a stag, and marvellous coloured hair, broke into a little laugh. "He can't bear her," she announced, "and all the office knows he loves you."

"Miss Richards is very spiteful about it too," put in Miss Duke. "She said the other day that you must find it very tiring being amusing for such long periods, because Mr. Hunter may be good looking, but he is awfully slow."

It was ridiculous to be angry about a little thing

like that, doubly ridiculous to vent her displeasure as Cynthia did upon Ted, but her annoyance found scope for great grievance in the mere fact of his placing her in such a position that the whole office could make remarks of that sort. Ted's reception when he next looked into her room was naturally chilly, not to say freezing.

"Have I done anything to annoy you?" he asked finally, various small attempts to draw her into amiability having failed.

Cynthia surveyed him coldly. "No," she said, "I don't happen to feel amusing to-day and I have got a great many letters to write if you would not mind leaving me alone to do them."

It was the first time they had ever made each other angry, and that so small a thing should have caused so deep a quarrel went far to show how near lay the flame of passion to their make-believe. For three days Ted Hunter, held in a sullen fit of depression, avoided Cynthia, and never lifted his eyes from his work, or in any sort of way joined in the conversation of the others. Cynthia, the first day, was annoyed and a little surprised, on the second, surprised and a little hurt, and on the third, very much hurt and thoroughly miserable; yet pride prevented her taking the first step towards peace. Then Sunday intervened, and on the fourth day of their quarrel an incident occurred that swept aside all thoughts of pride and left her face to face with the truth of her own feelings.

"Mr. Hunter went to the dance on Saturday," Miss Duke informed Cynthia first thing on Monday morning. "Miss Richards asked him, and she says——"

"Oh, shut up, Miss Duke," a red-haired girl put in, "I don't see what you want to repeat Miss Richard's yarns, for they probably aren't true."

"I don't believe them either," admitted Miss Duke, "only they are rather funny."

"Tell on, then," suggested Cynthia; she was waiting to get the morning letters and Mr. Townsend was indulging in a wordy argument with Mr. Thompson in the office.

"Well," even the red-haired girl laid down what she was working at to watch the effect of Miss Duke's communication. "She says he sat out an awful lot with her, and he—" her voice dropped to a delighted whisper, "he kissed her."

"I don't believe it," was Cynthia's first instinctive thought, and she voiced it before she had had time to remember pride or prudence.

"Even if he did," suggested the red-haired girl—her voice sounded sympathetic, she had always taken a romantic interest in Ted and Cynthia—"it was probably because she asked him to, or——"

Cynthia had had time to remember pride. "I don't think it really need interest us one way or the other," she interrupted. "What other adventures did Miss Richards have to relate?"

"Oh, none," Miss Duke shook her head and the red-

haired girl picked up her work again. "Mr. Townsend has got heaps of yarns, but you will probably hear them yourself some time or other."

Cynthia went back to her own room, a sheaf of letters to be answered in her hand, a storm of something—jealousy she would not admit to—in her heart. She found Ted in his accustomed place, which had not seen him for four days, looking out of the window. He turned as she opened the door and their eyes met, neither of them saying a word; then Cynthia, feeling for some strange reason as though the room were shaking round her, slipped round the table and sat down in her chair.

"It is a long time since you honoured me," she said, hoping her voice sounded as unconcerned as she tried to make it. "Got over being stuffy?"

The man left the window and came and stood beside her, his figure blocking out the light, shutting her as it were into the corner of the room. Cynthia did not raise her head to look at him, only she noticed his hands, how the muscles stood out on them, how tight he had them clenched. It gave her an odd thrill of fear to watch his hands, and though she was aware that silence was dangerous, she could find no word to break it. It seemed a long time that they remained like that. Cynthia had no conception of the fight the man was waging with himself. Her own breath was coming a little fast and those clenched hands of his fascinated her; she could not take her eyes from them. Then suddenly, giving way to an instinct that had been

prompting her from the first, she put out her own cool, small fingers and laid them on his.

"Have you been awfully angry?" she whispered; her voice would not rise above a whisper.

Like the first wave overcoming the wall which has for months withstood the fury of the tide, that touch of hers broke down the man's self-control, what followed was as inevitable as the inrush of the tide. No shadow of pretence or convention stood between them for the moment; they were just man and woman, and Cynthia lifted her mouth obedient to the call of his desire. The world floated away from her: time became as nothing: she hardly realized even that she was being kissed.

Nor did she attempt to hold back, it was the man, who after a second or two drew his lips away and stood up.

"I am glad," she heard him say, "God, how glad! And yet, sorry, dear, if it has hurt you."

His voice broke the spell, and Cynthia struggled in his arms.

"Please let me go," she said, somewhat half-heartedly; "supposing somebody was to come into the room."

"I don't care," answered the man, his voice glad and triumphant. "The whole office may dash in if they like."

He tilted up her face and their eyes met again, and then their lips, till at last Cynthia lay back against his arm, dazed and a little giddy from the tumult of her own awakened feelings.

"Oh, don't," she whispered, "please, please, don't

kiss me again. I want to think, to try and understand things, and I can't think while you are so near. Will you leave me alone, just for a little, please? Give me time to find out what it all means?"

The man stood away at once, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "What a brute I am," he said, "to take you at a disadvantage like that. And yet I am afraid to go and leave you to your thoughts, as you say. Your brain will be against me; you will realize that I had no right to touch you or kiss you, but I love you, that is the truth of the matter. I love you. What are you going to do about it?"

"I want to think," answered Cynthia. She put up her hands, they seemed as cold as ice against her flushed cheeks. "Is this really love?" She asked her eternal question hardly above a whisper.

Ted held out his hands impulsively, and caught hers away from her face so that he could look into her eyes again.

"Do you doubt it?" he asked.

But Cynthia drew her hands away: she had just remembered what she had heard that morning. "I don't know what to think," she answered slowly. "Just kissing a person doesn't always mean that you love them, does it?"

"No," Ted admitted. "Sometimes not kissing them means more. I have wanted to kiss you for so long, dreamt of it so often, that the struggle to prevent myself has been no easy matter. To-day, somehow, your eyes seemed to carry some different message, I——"

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he broke off suddenly and turned away, walking over to the window. "Did it seem hateful to you?" he asked, his back towards her, his voice so low that Cynthia could barely catch the words.

Hateful to her!—Cynthia leant quickly over the table and sorted out her letters, she would at that moment rather have died than admit how unhateful it had been, her heart was proving such a traitor to all the rules and standards of her brain. So the man got no answer; in the pause that followed he read his own meaning into her silence and though his eyes looked out on bright gay sunshine it seemed to them that everything was black. Then he turned to her again, his face white, his eyes heavy.

"I suppose I ought to apologize," he said, "for what I have done. If you are thinking very badly of me, will you remember that it has not altogether been my fault? I think you have known for some time that I loved you, and you, well, you have not always made the fight easy for me." He moved over to the door. "And I am not sorry," he went on, suddenly his voice was hoarse; "if it all ends here and now, I shall be glad to the last hour of my life that I have kissed you."

CHAPTER XVI

MISS POWELL HAS HER DOUBTS

OF course it did not all end there. Cynthia was at some pains to explain to herself why it did not, and she refused even in the privacy of her own thoughts to admit to the real reason. So far had she drifted into love for Ted, the currents and tides of her life helping her, that now, even if the power to steer clear from his influence had been given to her, it is to be doubted if she would have exercised it. His kisses were not hateful to her; all the other excuses she brought forward to explain her course of conduct were very good and partly true, but they would not have weighed an iota if the great fact of her awakened sense of love had not been behind them, and love—how could she own to love! So she was first of all sorry for Ted—his aloof wretchedness gave scope for that—then curious, then anxious to help, even to the extent of sacrificing her own principles, quite forgetting that these same

principles had been scattered to the winds long before, with the first touch of his lips on hers. And the game was played well; Nature fits women for the task of fostering a man's desire and concealing all the time their own. Bernard Shaw perhaps gets rather nearer the truth than any other modern writer in his crude description of woman's chase of man; only woman does it instinctively; not, as he would have us believe, with some deep plan of marriage and motherhood behind the action.

Cynthia, during the course of the next week, persuaded Ted into a belief that she was the kind of person who disliked being kissed; not because she disliked him in particular, but just because hers was a nature so aloof and pure that physical contact of any sort was repellent to her. That he did not find difficult to believe, for the idea had been in his own heart to start with. From there, she advanced him slowly to the fact that instead of being angry with him she was intensely pitiful. If she put out hands to touch him, or lifted perilously sweet lips and bewildered eyes to meet his longing, it was not because she wanted him to kiss her—as he might have been led to suppose—but was merely due to her desire to help him if she could, with sympathy. It did not help him, but then how was she to have known that—that was his fault, not hers. All this Ted fully realized; then ten days after the kissing episode he plucked up courage to ask her to go to the theatre with

him again, and out of her miraculous kindness she consented.

They dined together at a small, unpretentious restaurant in the heart of Soho, and across the table, its gay vase of roses pushed a little to one side, the clatter of knives and forks all round them, the wailing notes of a violin mingling with the sound of voices and whispered conversations from the neighbouring tables, Cynthia broached the subject of Miss Richards, a subject which had on the whole worried her pretty considerably during the past fortnight.

"Did you have a good dance the other night?" she asked.

"Rotten!" the man answered—his eyes fell from hers, and he frowned.

Cynthia watching him smiled a little, she had had the answer to the question in her mind, but she was not content to rest there.

"Why rotten?" she queried. "Wasn't Miss Richards nice to you?"

"I suppose it was myself that made it rotten," Ted answered shortly. "Need we talk about it?"

"Not if you would rather not," Cynthia agreed innocently. "Miss Richards seemed to be full of such exciting tales, I thought——"

The man lifted his head quickly, and caught her half-quizzical glance. "You know then?" he said; and added rather inconsequently, "nine men out of ten would have done what I did."

Cynthia raised surprised eyebrows. "What did you do?" she asked.

"She wanted me to kiss her, and I kissed her," Ted explained brusquely.

Cynthia broke into a ripple of amused laughter. Ted was funny in his present attitude of ashamed truthfulness. "'The woman tempted me,'" she reminded him; "man's old argument since the world began—why not own to more of the truth?"

"Because what you think is the truth, isn't," he answered stubbornly. "I didn't want to kiss her, I hated it. It mayn't be nice of me to say so, and you won't believe it, but it's true. She wanted me to—girls can show you that very plainly, you know—and I—" he leant a little nearer across the table towards her, and his eyes held hers very steadfastly, "well, perhaps I was a little tired of the everlasting struggle for self-repression, perhaps I even hoped that I should like it, that it would help to ease the insane craving for something else that had been going on in my heart. It is your own doctrine of man's love, you will remember. I tried to prove it true. It was a ghastly failure."

Cynthia's face flushed, and she devoted a very careful attention to her ice.

"Has it ever entered your head to think that kind of thing about me?" she asked after a minute or two.

"What sort of thing?" Ted asked.

"That I wanted you to kiss me," answered Cynthia. She did not lift her head and the knowledge that there

was truth behind the question made the hot blood flame in her cheeks.

"Sometimes, in my dreams," the man answered; "but I am not a fool, I don't delude myself with that kind of hope when I am awake."

"Does she love you?" investigated Cynthia; the weight of doubt lifted from her mind, she could afford to be curious.

"Of course not," Ted answered—he stood up and signed to the waiter to bring the bill—"that kind of thing isn't love."

"You draw a line too, then," argued Cynthia, as they came out of the restaurant door into the quiet, dim street, "like Mattie and Elsie and all the others. This is love, you say, that isn't: how is one to know?" Her face was perplexed and earnest. "In both instances you kissed us: why is what you give me, love, and what you give her, not love?"

"I didn't give her anything," the man answered. As she walked beside him the brim of Cynthia's hat just shut the outline of her face from his eyes; he was seized with an insane desire to put up his hands and take it off. His mind was on fire with a longing for a sight of her lips and eyes.

"But you kissed her," persevered Cynthia.

"Yes," he admitted.

"And you kissed me," continued Cynthia. "What is the difference?" she asked, and paused in their walk to look up at him.

"Just this," answered Ted—his hands caught her

arms in a grip of iron—"I love you, love you sufficiently to crush back self and all desires of gratifying self into the background of my life. Do you know what I should do if I didn't love you?"—his face for the moment was grim and stern—"I should take you and crush you in my arms, take my fill of you and your kisses; do you think you could stop me, or fight against me, if I didn't love you? That is the brute in man, and you are frightened of it and powerless against it. Because I love you," his hands loosened their hold slipped down her arms till they reached her hands and held them gently, "you will never have any reason to be afraid of me. You will never meet that side of me,"—he lifted her hands and pressed them to his face—"God helping me," he whispered.

Cynthia caught her breath in a sob, and though he would have let go her hands she clung to his, pulling herself a little nearer to him.

"I am frightened now," she owned, "but not altogether of you."

Sitting together a little later in the darkness of the theatre, whilst a melodramatic hero, to the strains of a pleading waltz, told the coy heroine of his passion for her, Ted kissed Cynthia again, just the faint brushing of his lips against her cheek. She turned in the gloom to meet his eyes, and heart spoke to heart in the silence, till Cynthia's eyes fell before his, and her only answer was that she moved a little nearer to him, and somehow or other his hands found hers and held them.

"It is the most extraordinary way to behave in a

theatre," remonstrated Cynthia, woman-like the first to be aware of outside observance once the lights had flared up again. But that, and the warm flush of her cheeks, was the only remonstrances she offered to his conduct. It is hardly a matter of surprise that Ted paid very little attention to either.

A rapturous fortnight followed for Cynthia, a time of stolen kisses and quick glad moments, when the blood thrilled in her heart. She was content just to live for the time being—thoughts and arguments, doubts and fears, she pushed aside; love held the whole world. He took her nature and shook it alive to a pulsating melody of joy.

"I thought," she said once to Ted, as she leaned back against his arms, tired and almost bruised from the strength of his holding, "that I was looking for a man who would love me just with his brain and only in words; now I know that it is the feeling of your strength, the hard force of your arms round me, that wakes my heart. I love you because you are strong and rough, and a man, and you—well, you don't love me for my soul, do you?"

"I love you for everything about you," the man answered. "For the colour of your eyes and hair, for the soft smoothness of your face, the cool sweet touch of your arms and neck, I suppose I love your soul too, but I can't kiss it, as I can your body."

Cynthia turned in his arms. "Don't say things like that," she remonstrated. "It makes me blush." Then she laughed and buried her face against his coat.

"I am glad I am nice and soft and smooth to touch, Ted. I like you to love me for all that." A sudden doubt seized her, she freed herself a little from his hold, and looked up at him. "I wonder if it is bad?" she asked.

"If what is bad, you funny child?" queried Ted.

"All this," explained Cynthia gravely, her eyes looked worried. "Letting you kiss me, and liking it and—oh, everything?"

"Why should it be." Ted caught her to him again and bent to kiss the stray curl that was forever blowing across her face, but Cynthia put up protesting hands and pushed him away. "I hadn't thought of it like that before," she mused, "but I suppose it is wrong what we are doing, at least, I suppose doing wrong begins with something just like this."

Ted laughed and caught her hands, forcing her eyes to meet his. "You know quite well that it isn't, that it couldn't be wrong," he said.

"No, I don't," argued Cynthia; "the kindest thing that people could say about us," she went on with infinite wisdom, "would be that we are not wise; it is not a very far step from that to being wicked."

The man's face grew suddenly grave, he pulled her towards him, and hid her perplexed eyes with one hand. "I'll see to it that the worst they can ever say of us, darling, is that we were not wise," he whispered; "trust that to me."

"Very well," laughed Cynthia, as she put up her hands to smooth her ruffled hair; "the responsibility

shall be yours. In the meanwhile, will you please remember that this is an office and our present position is most unbusiness-like?"

"I am just going," agreed Ted, "but before I go, say yes to coming to the theatre to-night."

Cynthia shook her head. "I can't, Ted," she answered, "really and truly, I can't. It would be the fourth night running, and I must think of Elsie, you know. I have been so happy just lately, that I haven't bothered about her very much."

Which in a sense was deplorably true. Cynthia was contrite for her forgetfulness when she paused to remember. Poor Elsie, how dull the evenings must seem to her now, how dull the days. In a certain sense Cynthia could more fully sympathize with the blank in Elsie's life now that she herself had awakened to a knowledge of how good life can be. She stopped at a florist's on her way home that evening, and bought a few flowers, Elsie's favourite—scented Parma violets.

"I will get back first," was her thought, "and make the flat look really nice, and I will have the supper ready and everything before she arrives."

As a matter of fact, supper was prepared and eaten, in the end, by Cynthia alone. Elsie did not appear. At half-past nine Miss Powell knocked and thrust her gray head round the corner of the door.

"Actually at home?" she asked. "You two girls have been turning night into day lately."

"I am in," explained Cynthia. "Elsie hasn't arrived

yet, but I don't suppose she will be long. Won't you come in and keep me company ? ”

Miss Powell's figure followed her head ; she shut the door carefully behind her. “ The two of you haven't been out much together lately, have you ? ” she asked.

“ No,” admitted Cynthia, she flushed slightly. “ I have been doing the round of the theatres with a friend. Has Elsie been out too ? I didn't know.”

Miss Powell nodded. She moved across to the window, and pulling the curtain aside, peered out.

“ Mr. Mathews has planted his tulips all wrong,” she remarked inconsequently ; then she turned to Cynthia : “ Has Elsie any friends to go about with, barring you ? ” she asked.

“ I don't think so,” Cynthia answered, she stirred uneasily. “ But just lately she has seemed to want to be by herself ; she has grown awfully unsociable since her illness.”

Miss Powell's eyes watched her gravely. “ I am afraid she is terribly unhappy,” she said presently. “ One does not always choose one's friends wisely under those circumstances.”

“ What do you mean ? ” asked Cynthia.

“ I have seen Elsie once or twice, lately, when she has been out,” explained Miss Powell briefly. “ Both times that I have met her she has been with another woman, some one whom, from her appearance, I should describe as a most undesirable acquaintance.”

“ Do you mean a rather stout, over-dressed woman,

with very loud coloured hair and peculiar eyes ! ” asked Cynthia.

“ That almost describes her, ” nodded Miss Powell.

“ Oh, that ”—a note of relief sounded in Cynthia’s voice—“ is a Mrs. MacNab, who had the flat below Elsie’s in Queen’s Road. Elsie did not seem to like her, but she always said she seemed very kind-hearted and anxious to be friends. I only saw her once and I hated her. ” She bent her head over her sewing again. “ When you began telling me about Elsie, ” she admitted, “ I was afraid perhaps it was another man. ”

Miss Powell pulled up a chair and sat down ; the worry had not lifted from her face. “ Some women are much more dangerous than any man could be to Elsie now, ” she said. “ I wish—— ”

Whatever her wish was to have been, the telling of it was broken off short by Elsie’s entrance. She stood in the doorway a minute or two, before coming in, surveying the occupants, and a curious wave of scent came into the room with her. Her cheeks were unnaturally flushed, her eyes bright and hard.

“ Hullo, ” she said, nodding to Miss Powell, and addressing Cynthia, “ you are in to-night, are you ? I didn’t say anything about not coming into supper, because I fully expected you would be out too. Sorry if you waited for me. ”

Her voice was curiously unfamiliar. Cynthia found herself staring at Elsie, and she did not seem to find anything to say in answer to the other’s greeting. Miss Powell stood up, her eyes had grown a little stern.

"Have you had anything to eat?" she asked.

Elsie glanced at her and laughed. "Oh, yes," she said, "I have had something to eat all right." She closed the door and crossed the room, and taking off her hat flung it aside on to the bed while she stood in front of the glass surveying herself. "Do you like me like this, West?" she asked suddenly, turning to Cynthia and ignoring Miss Powell's stern grave figure. "I've been to Ascot with Mrs. MacNab's party; champagne lunch and champagne supper, with a free doing of my hair in the latest style thrown in. Do you like the result? Mrs. MacNab achieved it."

Cynthia stood up. Her eyes went from Elsie's head of terribly arranged hair to Miss Powell's face; she was conscious of a paralysing tension in the air."

"It is very wonderful," she managed at last, her eyes coming back to Elsie. "But how did you manage about office."

"I just didn't go," stated Elsie. She shrugged her shoulders and sank into a chair. "God, I am tired," she said; "just dead to the world, and it has all been hateful—hateful." Her voice broke: she jerked back her head defiantly. "But at least it is better than office. I shall never, never, go to office again."

"Elsie," gasped Cynthia. She took a quick step towards her friend, but Miss Powell intervened.

"Don't bother her with questions to-night," she said. "She is dead tired, one can see that, and a little over excited. The best thing you can both do is to pack

off to bed and argue out this question of office in the morning."

Elsie had risen with one arm resting on the mantelpiece. She was studying her face in the glass, the over-flushed cheeks, the hard red of her lips, the smudge of the pencil round her eyes.

"Yes, I am tired"—she nodded to the reflection—"and over excited ; it's a kind way to put it." She straightened herself fiercely. "I'll go to bed,"—she caught Miss Powell's eyes and stared at them defiantly. "And I'll play the game now and always by her"—she nodded towards Cynthia. "You needn't be afraid of that."

She picked up her hat and moved to the front room, turning by the door to look at them again. Under the paint her face had grown white, and her eyes for the moment were dilated with something akin to fear.

"No one will ever play the game by me after to-day," she whispered, talking more to herself than to either of her companions. Then she went through into the other room and shut the door behind her. They could hear the key turning in the lock.

CHAPTER XVII

ELSIE'S CHOICE

I DON'T believe you," stated Cynthia hotly. She faced Miss Powell in the little front room of the flat, the room that had been Elsie's bedroom. It bore a deserted and bare appearance this evening; the few pictures of her father and mother and the vicarage home, which Elsie had permitted to adorn the walls, had been taken down, the spaces where they had hung looking like oases of cleanliness upon the dust-covered paper. None of Elsie's customary untidy profusion was visible anywhere—a mournful box, bulging and tight rope-bound, occupied the centre of the room, and the bed had been stripped of its coverings.

"I won't believe you," Cynthia repeated.

She turned and gazed miserably round the room. Old memories and recollections of Elsie in the days when they had first met filled her mind. Elsie, long-limbed and pyjama clad, clamouring for life; Elsie, eager and

scornful, showing her how to punt in Regent's Park and falling in herself during the process ; Elsie's voice singing about the flat ; her quaint efforts at tidying and cooking, her periodical gusty attempts at cleaning things ; Elsie, with the hard bright face, the questioning eyes.

"I can't believe you," Cynthia whispered it for the third time, and she put up her hands to her face, pressing the fingers against her eyes.

Miss Powell's glance rested on her. "My dear," she said, "I am not angry or surprised that you do not wish to believe me. I would have you loyal to your friend within the bounds of reason. I want you just to understand that trying to help her will only hurt and damage yourself. She does not want your help ; she must 'dree her own weird,' as my Scotch mother used to say."

"Then it is our fault," asserted Cynthia. She faced round, accusing and stern. "That night when she came home, after she had been to those races, if you had let me go to her as I wanted to, I could have helped her, I know I could. She was hurt because I failed her then. After that, she would not open her lips to me about what had happened. You pushed her aside, you made her feel she wasn't fit for us to touch or speak to. Oh, I shall never forgive myself, never ; it is as if we had cried out 'unclean' at her, and swept aside our skirts from her touch."

She threw herself down on the floor by Elsie's box and hid her face in her hands, crying like a child that has

been punished. Miss Powell did not attempt to stop the crying or to offer any sympathy; she sat erect and stiff on the bed, her hands in front of her. Cynthia's wild accusations were so unjust that they could be ignored. Her own conscience troubled her a little more, and yet she had acted altogether up to her ideas of right.

Miss Powell had had two interviews with Elsie in the days that followed that arrival of the girl's at the flat, and both times she had spoken bluntly and truthfully. Would kind compassion have been better? It was not that she had not felt compassionate, her heart had ached for Elsie, but even where your heart is breaking with sympathy there are still the rights and wrongs in life to be considered if you are a person built in Miss Powell's pattern. She had wanted to sift the right from the wrong in Elsie's life and lay them clearly before the girl's eyes. It did not seem to Miss Powell that it could be difficult to choose between the two, once they were both made clear.

"You sinned in the first instance," she stated to Elsie, "sinned freely, and of your own will, and you have paid the price. Let that atone; to cry out against just punishment, child, is wicked, not foolish."

"It was not sin," answered Elsie. "If I had life over again I would choose to do the same. I loved the man—even your Christ of the Bible found it in His heart to forgive the woman whom men accused of sin because she loved."

"'Go, and sin no more,' are His words," Miss Powell reminded her.

"Do you think He knew how impossible His command was," asked Elsie. "How could He know? He wasn't human. Hot blood didn't pulse in His veins, wild thoughts didn't drive Him nearly mad. What is the use of your talking to me? You have never even known what it is to find goodness stifling."

"Thank God," admitted Miss Powell.

"That is just it," agreed Elsie. "Thank God. Thank Him because He has shut temptation from your life, out of your heart. But don't attempt to think you can understand what standing against temptation is like."

Miss Powell tried another tack at their next talk.

"Wherein lies your temptation this time?" she asked. "There is no man. It is not as if you were meeting him again; you cannot lay the blame on or shelter behind the excuse of love, can you? We can speak the truth to each other if you care to. I am an old woman and not so ignorant of temptation as you suppose. I want to help you, too; won't you understand that?"

Elsie's face grew sullen. She had drawn back—it was a relief to Miss Powell to be able to remember that now—from the hand held out to help her.

"I couldn't explain to you," she stated bluntly. "It would only shock you; besides, it is nobody's business but mine. You can tell Cynthia whatever you please, the truth if you like. Tell her that I am choosing to be bad of my own free-will, and that she had better forget me

as quickly as possible. If I ever meet her in the streets I shan't speak to her."

"You are talking very wildly," remonstrated Miss Powell. "Even I have far more idea of the horror of the life you so rashly choose than you can have. Do you think I shall stand aside and let you go like this?"

"And how are you to prevent me?" asked Elsie. "I choose to go; there is heaps of room for me among the ranks of the 'unfortunate women', aren't they called? Millions of hands stretched out anxious to pull me in amongst them, and if I select degradation and shame and horror as my portion in life, is there any one, do you think, that will deny them to me? Oh, no, I am going and no one is to blame except myself."

"There you are right," agreed Miss Powell, a flush of righteous anger on her thin cheek. "No one is to blame except yourself."

Elsie turned on her abruptly. "Nature and Fate and Circumstance don't count for anything, I suppose. I used to think I was strong, but I have broken myself against them. The fight hasn't ended in my favour."

"You are strong." Miss Powell stood up sternly, "strong for evil. Each of us has sufficient strength to shape our lives for good; you do not choose to, that is all."

Elsie watched her. Then she smiled a little, perhaps at the rigid disapproval so vividly portrayed in Miss Powell's face. "If there is a God at the end of things," she said, "let's hope He will be better at finding excuses for me than you are."

That was the sentence that remained in Miss Powell's mind and worried her a little. She had left the girl then, ruffled and angry, and next morning Cynthia had called at her door early, with a white face and an open letter in her hand.

"Elsie has gone away somewhere," she explained. "Last night she never came in, and this morning I received this letter from her. It gives directions as to what is to be done with her box and ends up by saying : 'Good-bye, West ; in saying good-bye to you, I leave also my old life and name behind me. Don't try and find me, nor wait for me to come back. Think of me as out of your life as completely as if I were dead, and if this doesn't satisfy you, ask Miss Powell ; if she cares, she can give you the answer to the riddle.' "

"What does it mean ?" Cynthia had asked. That evening Miss Powell had tried to explain, and Cynthia's passionate denial was the result of the explanation. "I won't believe it."

"It is not right for you to blame yourself or me," Miss Powell ventured presently, when the crying had dwindled down to stifled sobs. "I may have seemed hard to you, but I had no intention of being so, though I cannot condone what she has done. And I tried to persuade her against it, but her mind was quite made up. She is following her own inclinations, we must remember."

Cynthia sat up straight and pushed the hair back from her forehead.

"You say you know the life she has chosen. You talk vaguely of sin and degradation : and of Elsie as if she were

some poor woman of the streets. Do you know anything definite? Have you any real idea as to where she is?"

Miss Powell nodded. "I know," she answered. "I taxed her with it, and she admitted the truth."

"Tell me again what it is you know," said Cynthia.

"I know that she has gone to a house kept by this Mrs. MacNab, whom you have met, where women like her can run their ghastly trade—a house known to the police and marked as a place of ill-fame. So much Elsie told me herself; I verified her story to-day."

"You have been to the house?" questioned Cynthia. She struggled to a kneeling position, and stared at Miss Powell across Elsie's corded box. "You have seen Elsie since she left here?"

"I did not see Elsie," Miss Powell admitted. "I saw the woman MacNab for a few minutes in the hall. She told me that Elsie was quite well and happy, that she did not wish to be bothered, and added that she supposed every one was at liberty to choose their own profession." Her face stiffened at the recollection of the interview. "Believe me, you and I can do no more for your friend."

"Yet we must try," answered Cynthia; "at least, I must. I cannot leave her, let her go; we were such pals." She stood up, her hands tight clenched. "If there is anything in friendship, we were friends. I won't let her shut me right out of her life like this. Will you tell me where this house is?" she turned impetuously to Miss Powell. "I will go now, at once, to-night, and try and see her."

Miss Powell rose to her feet stiffly. "No," she said,

"I will not tell you. If I knew that Elsie was dying I would not help you to go to her."

"But you must," Cynthia caught at her hands.

"Don't you see how wicked it is of you to keep me from her, if there is any chance of my being able to help her?"

"My dear," said Miss Powell kindly—she held Cynthia's hand, and her eyes were steadfast and clear—

"I am an old woman compared to you, and I have my own ideas as to what is right and wrong; you will not move me from them. In everything else I will do what I can to help you, but to prevent you from following Elsie I will use the last drop of my strength and will-power. You cannot argue against my convictions on that point."

"Then I will find her for myself," flung back Cynthia.

"You cannot prevent me from doing that."

Miss Powell's assistance having failed her, Cynthia took the weight of her trouble to Ted, telling him bit by bit the whole of Elsie's story, ending up with that evening in the flat and Elsie's statement of "I won't go back to office." She added Miss Powell's remarks over the disappearance and the final fact of her refusal to impart Elsie's present address.

Ted was privately of the opinion that Miss Powell was quite justified in her course of action, but he was also aware that there was no use in trying to impress this on Cynthia.

"If you are really determined to see her, and think it will do any good," he said, "we will find her. It will be no more difficult for us than it was for Miss Powell. Only

one bargain I make, and that is that I come with you wherever it is."

That Cynthia acquiesced in, and one evening a day or two later, Ted ferreted out Mrs. MacNab's address from the landlady of Elsie's old flat, met Cynthia after office hours, and escorted her to an unpretentious looking street of drab, commonplace houses, opening off the Marylebone Road.

The door of the house, after a somewhat lengthy wait, was opened to them by an untidy foreign-looking waiter, his much creased shirt-front, that had once been white, open, minus studs or buttons, and bulging down the front. He gaped at them standing on the steps but made no effort to inquire their business or ask them inside. Ted, thorough dislike for the whole business in his heart, took the field first.

"Is there a Miss Hart staying here?" he asked abruptly. "We wish to see her."

The man caught the name apparently, but his face still lacked any glimmer of intelligence.

"Hart," he repeated. "No, not here."

Cynthia stepped a little to the front, of course Elsie would be living under another name.

"Mrs. MacNab, then," she said. "Can I see her for a minute or two?"

"Mrs. out," the man answered. He eyed them stolidly and yawned. A passing policeman stopped on the opposite side of the road to stare at them; his presence appeared to disconcert the waiter, who made a pretence of shutting the door.

"Wait a minute," said Ted, putting out his hand and holding the door against the waiter; "when will Mrs. MacNab be home?"

The policeman left his post and strolled carelessly across the road towards them. Vivid uneasiness showed in the waiter's face.

"I do not know," he said; "please oblige me by letting me shut the door."

His voice sounded belligerent, and there was nothing to be gained from making a row on the doorstep. Ted stepped back and turned to Cynthia.

"It is no use waiting, darling, is it?" he asked. "If you really want to find out about her, I will come back myself and push my way in; but I hate letting you come in contact with this sort of thing—honestly I feel like Miss Powell about it."

Cynthia stood undecided; she tilted back her head and looked up at the windows of the houses. It was just getting dark, all the windows but one were unlit and apparently deserted—could Elsie be in the room where that solitary light was? A half desire seized her to call out, "Elsie, Elsie," and see if she would reply. It passed as quickly as it came, and the policeman's voice speaking behind them startled her into clutching at Ted's arm. The whole atmosphere of the place was terrifying.

"Any trouble with the house?" the policeman asked. He seemed on the point of bestowing a little further information with regard to it, but Ted stopped him hurriedly, drawing Cynthia's arm within his, and leading her down the steps.

"No, thank you, constable, we were trying to make a foreigner understand a message we wish left for the lady who is out, that was all."

"Humph!" commented the officer; his eyes swept suspiciously over Ted and Cynthia and took in the front of the house in their survey. "Not her day at home, eh! Well, good-night to you," he added, and with heavy, slow steps he moved away, flashing the bull's-eye light of his lantern on the windows and door fastenings of the various houses.

Cynthia turned to Ted, clinging to him. "What are we to do?" she whispered. "I can't bear to go and leave her in this place—it all seems so horrible. I don't believe she can really have chosen it."

As if in answer to her doubt, and before Ted had had time to reply to her questions, a long grey motor, turning the corner at the top of the street rather perilously, came to a standstill opposite the house. Its two glaring front lights threw everything outside their radius into dense black shadow. Ted stood close back against the railings, holding Cynthia to him, so that the occupants of the car were unaware of any watchers. There was some sort of discussion in progress between the people in the body of the car as to who should get out first; finally, aided evidently by a deftly placed kick, an elderly, stout man was projected who landed in a sitting position on the pavement. A roar of laughter greeted this and his subsequent efforts to rise with grace and balance himself sufficiently to hand out the ladies, till at last, seeing that it left to himself the performance

would continue till midnight, a very tightly clad lady, whom Cynthia recognized as Mrs. MacNab, got out herself and quite good-naturedly assisted her intoxicated guest up the front steps.

"I don't need to ring," she called back to some one in the car; "I've got a latchkey. Monty will be all right once he is inside out of the air. Are you coming in, dearie, or are you two going for a drive on your own? You can please yourself, you know."

Cynthia could catch the sound of a whispered argument from the two people left in the car, then with a shock of bewildered horror she heard Elsie's voice, clear and distinct.

"Allan and I will go on for a bit, then," she was saying; "wait up for me, though, auntie—I hate having to ring Alphonse up if I am late; he is so rude."

"All right, dearie," answered the elder woman. She had got the door open now and was piloting her unsteady friend in.

Cynthia drew closer to Ted, as if mesmerized into silence. She watched the driver get out, start the car and climb back into his seat again: saw the long, grey body slide past them, gathering speed with every turn of the wheel, almost fancied that for just one second she caught the outline of Elsie's face and figure; then it had gone and she turned to Ted.

"Take me home, please, Ted," she said, and he gathered from the tone of her voice that she had received the answer to her question, and he wisely made no remark upon it at all.

At the door of 24, White's Avenue he would have said good-night and left her; it was his intention, only she looked so tired and miserable and the house seemed so dreary and dismal, that he could not bear to leave her like that.

"Shall I come upstairs and make some coffee for you?" he asked, "or do you think it will shock the neighbours if they see me coming in at this time of night?"

"It is not late," Cynthia answered—she too was averse to facing the loneliness of the flat upstairs—"do come in for a bit, Ted, I hate the flat when I am by myself—it seems full of noises."

"Poor darling!" whispered Ted, "I wish you didn't have to live in it alone. If I could only take you away from it all at once, if you would marry me straight out, to-morrow even, we wouldn't be millionaires, but I could look after you."

Cynthia stooped to extract the key from under the mat in front of the door, his words brought her a half sense of distress. Marriage and Ted—somehow she never thought of them together without calling up a stern vision of Mattie and what Mattie's opinion on the matter would be.

"The sister will be home in a fortnight, you know, Ted," she reminded him when they were inside. "I expect that will put an end to my flat life for a bit."

"Are you going to go away with her?" asked Ted. "Leave London?" He paused in the midst of his coffee-making to stare up at her.

"I suppose I shall have to for a time," agreed Cynthia.

She did not meet his eyes. "Hadn't you realized that?"

She moved into the other room and began taking off her hat and coat. "I have got such a shocking headache," she said; "will you be shocked if I take my hair down and plait it?"

"Good Lord, no," he answered.

After coffee was finished and he had cleared away the cups again, he came and sat beside her on the sofa, rather morosely, his eyes lowered, his hands playing with her fingers. Cynthia watching his bent head knew that some trouble was afoot. She had learnt to read his face like a book—jealousy she knew to be a devouring giant in his heart; he could be absurdly jealous of the most minute things, and when once awakened to this state he could prove very difficult to deal with, she knew. And she was tired to-night, depressed over Elsie. The world seemed a little out of joint; she did not feel like struggling with one of Ted's black moods.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked presently, closing her fingers over the restlessness of his.

Ted lifted his head and met her glance with miserable defiant eyes. "You wouldn't just slip out of my life and leave me, would you?" he asked. "When you go away with your sister, is that to be the end of things? Shall I ever see you again?"

"Ted, dear," remonstrated Cynthia, "why should you think that kind of thing? I am taking a fortnight's holiday. You know I have that whether Mattie is at home or not; last year I went home with Elsie."

"But once you are gone," the man persisted—he

drew her near to him with strong arms as if holding her against some invisible force—"how am I to know that you will ever come back? Mattie will try and keep you; do you think I don't realize that?"

"I shall come back," Cynthia whispered. The pressure of his arms was comforting to her over-tired body. "There will always be you to come back to."

The waves of her hair brushed against his cheek: her body soft and acquiescent lay in his arms: the warmth of her mouth was near his own.

Ted caught her to him and kissed her fiercely, kissed her eyes, her cheeks, the hollow of her neck, her chin, her lips, the passion of his kisses leaving her dazed and yet glowing. Ted had never kissed her quite like this before. He seemed, for the time being, to be swept out of all self-control, and fright—just the primæval fright of woman against man, with not very much thought as to the rights and wrongs of the situation—caused Cynthia to struggle in his arms. Her efforts only served to fan the flame of his passion; his arms were like iron round her and it seemed as if to resist would be hopeless. Then the man raised his head to kiss her on the mouth again, and summoning all her strength of will Cynthia lifted her eyes and held his.

"Ted, please, please, don't," was all she could find to say, and then it was only a whisper. She was not sure that she herself wanted it to be heard. But the man's hold on her loosened and he stood up abruptly. He attempted no explanation, but picking up his hat and stick walked straight to the door. There he turned, but not to look

at her ; his eyes took in everything else in the room ; they never touched on her.

"You are right," he acknowledged ; "it is late and time I was going. Good-night."

Then he had gone. Cynthia could hear his feet waking innumerable echoes in the old house and the slam of the front door.

She rose and moved a little unsteadily into the bedroom. Woman-like, her object gained, she half regretted her choice.

"That is the awful part about it," she confided to herself as she struggled out of her clothes and into bed. "I wanted him to stay."

The cool feeling of the sheets was refreshing. She snuggled into them, burying a hot, flushed face on the pillow.

"I wanted him to stay," she repeated, and once or twice in the night she stirred in her sleep whispering his name, the memory of his kisses invading even her land of dreams.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOOD-BYE

IT took Mattie exactly two days to discover that there was something, as the saying goes, on Cynthia's mind. For two days she struggled with the fact that her treasured baby had come back to her even more of a stranger than she had been when she left. True, Cynthia was no longer difficult to get on with; like a visitor to a strange house she was all anxiety to prove amenable and pleasant. For two days Mattie fought against this very real barrier of politeness; then, on the third day, some chance word set it flaming and she learnt about Ted. She found out about him, that is to say, Cynthia gave no willing confidence on the subject; Ted was more than ever a secret influence in her heart. So Mattie questioned and listened and prompted, and by these means arrived at a certain amount of knowledge. From the very beginning she made up her mind firmly and quite honestly that Ted Hunter did not sound like the sort of person Cynthia could marry; the only thing left to arrange was that Cynthia should be won from her allegiance with as little pain to herself as possible.

"What is wrong with the man?" asked Major Redwood bluntly, when the question was put to him.

"You don't realize, Jimmie," Mattie explained patiently. "Cynthia says herself he isn't a gentleman. Oh, I knew we were wrong," she went on passionately; "all these years I have known it, to leave Cynthia like that adrift from her own people. If she marries this man, I shall never forgive myself, never, never!"

"Well, dear," put in Major Redwood calmly, "surely it ought to be easy enough to prevent her. Shall I take her in hand, though, as a matter of fact, I don't see why you should be so certain that he is impossible? If she loves him——"

"Jimmie, dear," expostulated Mattie, "'if she loves him' has got nothing to do with it. You, of course, don't understand what it would mean to a girl. Love may be great and wonderful, but it isn't going to help her over the little petty details of life—the way he eats at table and the clothes he wears. Besides, what of the children. Oh no, Jimmie, it is absolutely and hopelessly impossible."

"Better send for Frank," suggested Major Redwood hopefully. "He might carry her off to India out of this impossible person's reach."

But Mattie set her mouth hard. "No," she said, "Frank shall not interfere again."

The way one woman deals with another in matters of this sort proves very strongly their powers of diplomacy.

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Mattie had ten days' to work her campaign in, for Cynthia, true to her promise to Ted, had asked only for a fortnight's holiday, but during those ten days a great deal was achieved. Very skilfully the thin wedge of doubt and uncertainty was slipped into Cynthia's mind. Never once did Mattie say anything definite against the prospect of matrimony with Ted ; had she done that it would have swung Cynthia round to an attitude of defiance ; the impression she managed to convey was much more realistic and effective. Cynthia could have fought against downright scorn and blame ; this creeping suggestion of doubt left her undecided and wavering. Mattie's arguments, her views, were so bitterly, so rigidly true. Cynthia could see their truth. The one flaming instinct she had to face them with was her love for Ted, and that she could not discuss with Mattie. So bit by bit she gave way, wavered in her allegiance, missed Ted, longed at times passionately for his presence, the feel of his strength, the thrill of his kisses, longed—and at the same time was ashamed of the longing. All her former feelings about love and marriage weighed against Ted at this time. She was ashamed of memories that her training caused her to look upon as degrading. Other things weighed against him too—the comfort of life in Mattie's house, the pleasantness of long summer days spent in a round of amusements, even the very men she met, so essentially different from him—the Captains and subalterns of Jimmie's regiment, for the Redwoods had been posted on the day of their arrival to Plymouth, and Plymouth boasts a large garrison. At the end of eight

days Cynthia wrote to Mr. Thompson, announcing her intention of not coming back to work, sending back her holiday pay, and apologizing for any inconvenience this abrupt decision might put him to. That letter Mattie and she composed together. There were two more that went by the same post that neither of them confided to the other they were writing.

“Dear Ted,” Cynthia wrote; her pen stuck on the name, the words were difficult to find. In the end the letter was curt and indifferent, and showed nothing of the feelings that struggled against each other in her heart. “You will see from this letter that after all I find that I cannot come back. I wonder if you will blame me very much; I hope not. And you will know—I do not think you have ever been ignorant—of the wall that stands between us, between your people and my people. I have tried to believe that together we could pull it down; it is as if all the time my heart has known how impossibly strong and rigid it was. So I am not going to try any more; mine has always been a nature that runs away from difficulties. You will remember how you once said to me that whatever I trusted you to do you would do it. Well, I am putting that to the test now, for I am trusting you to let me go, to allow me to slip out of your life—I, upon whom you have so great a claim, without making any sort of fuss or even pleading with me to stay. I know it will hurt you; I want you not to show me any of the pain. Indeed, Ted, that is because I have enough to bear of my own and not all selfishness; you have taught

me something I shall find it hard to forget ; it is not all pretence to say ' I love you.' ”

Mattie wrote more firmly and to the point. She did not know Ted ; it is to be doubted if even for a moment she stopped to weigh his feelings in the balance ; her one thought and aim and idea was to free Cynthia from an entanglement which might one day prove exceedingly cumbersome.

“ Dear Mr. Hunter, I am writing to you as Cynthia’s eldest sister, practically her mother ; for, as you know, Cynthia has lived with us ever since our people died. Cynthia talks of some engagement between you two. Because you love her, and she in some sense loves you, there must be something in your nature that will understand this letter and prevent you from being just furiously angry with me. I want to take her from you. It is quite true : with the last drop of my influence I would fight to prevent her marrying you. It is only because I am older and perhaps wiser than either of you. However great your love, you could not make her happy—there is no happiness to be found in marrying some one out of your own class. If you are content to stand aside now——” the writing broke off short and continued somewhat disjointedly. “ As I write this letter I am conscious for the first time of how great a sacrifice I am asking you to make, of how much I am building on the largeness of the love I am imploring Cynthia to push out of her life. My only excuse is that I love her too, and I have loved

her since she was a tiny baby, and I know her. If you are content to let it rest with her now, she will forget."

Forget !—could she forget, Ted wondered ? Would not the greatness of his love, the passion of his need for her, cry out to Cynthia's heart at every pause of silence in her new life. Was it true that in so short a time she could have pushed him from her life ? Across whatever space of time and distance would not his spirit reach to hers and clamour for its share in the memory of her heart ? And was not the tie that bound them together as man and woman stronger than any civilized creed or social difference ? He was a man and he loved her. What weight could Mattie's arguments have against the knowledge of his heart and mind that Cynthia was a woman and that she loved him ? That evening, after office hours, and before answering either of the letters, he went for a long walk walking blindly and stubbornly, he scarcely knew or cared where, so long as the physical exercise should dull and quieten the mental agony and conflict of his mind.

Perhaps from the beginning he knew he fought a losing fight. Against Mattie's arguments he might be able to fling defiance ; he was strong enough, if he put up a claim, to hold Cynthia as his against the whole world. Against Cynthia's plea there was no need to fight at all ; it was an acknowledgment of defeat. Even as she wrote it, she loved him ; what force could keep her from him if he held out his arms and called to her to come. Against the faint ghostly memory of his mother, whose grey tear-laden eyes haunted him from the shadows, he could

use neither scorn nor pleading. He knew what it was she argued for ; love had not brought her happiness ; could he deny her the right to plead for Cynthia ? Her face as he had seen it last, just stiffening into the forgetfulness of death, the mouth a little twisted as if she had fallen asleep on an unpleasant thought, the frail hands crossed, the eyes closed, taunted him with her knowledge. She had cried so much in her lifetime ; would what he claimed as his right to give Cynthia bring with it this same burden of tears ? From the first Ted knew that his mother's memory stood between him and all that he might have done to hold Cynthia to himself : knew it, and laid down at once his weapons of defence. It was the mockery of fate that she, for whose memory he gave up so much, could offer him no shred of comfort through the bitterness of the black hour that followed. He lived that alone. There was nothing to show next day that anything had occurred to disturb the ordinary routine of life. It was only that the fetters cut a little more deeply into his flesh. He knew, if no one else did, how intolerable the burden of the days had become, the mockery of the nights with their unprofitable dreams.

Mattie's was the only letter he answered. " I agree, as you must have known I would," he wrote, " in the justice of your argument. Quite apart from Miss Weston not wishing to marry me, I can see from your point of view how impossible it all was."

That letter Mattie did not show Cynthia. Ted's silence, she argued, was sufficient answer. For herself, the man had suddenly grown very real to her

perhaps because his letter said so little and left so much of what he was feeling to her imagination. She never thought of him without feeling a hot touch of shame in her heart, and had Cynthia then shown any definite intention of sticking to her choice and returning to her allegiance, it is to be doubted if Mattie for one would have offered any further resistance.

But Cynthia appeared acquiescent. True, she kept whatever she felt to herself, and from the day when the post brought her answer from Ted in the shape of no letter until the day when she finally took matters into her own hands, Cynthia never mentioned his name to Mattie again, nor talked at all of her life in London, of Elsie, of Miss Powell, or the flat. It was all laid away and forgotten, Mattie hoped. Cynthia, she knew, had marvellous powers of forgetfulness; the memory, at least after the first two months, did not appear to damp her spirits. She entered very fully into all the gaiety of her social life and seemed indefatigable in her search for amusement.

Major Redwood, for one, was perfectly satisfied that all had worked out for the best; it remained only to provide Cynthia with a suitable husband, a task, taking into consideration the number of men in the garrison, which ought not to prove difficult.

CHAPTER XIX

" I HAVE FORGOTTEN "

CAPTAIN HUDSON leant forward in his chair and turned his head to gaze up at Cynthia as she sat back in the shadows.

" I think," he said enthusiastically, " that this has been the best dance of the season ; such a ripping idea having it outside, isn't it ? And ' Dreaming,' don't you think that is the jolliest dance that has ever been written ? "

The refrain of the said melody reached them faint and subdued in their retreat. Even staring at her as he was, Captain Hudson could see only a very dim outline of Cynthia's face and hair, the white of her neck and shoulders blending into the soft white of her dress, but the dimmest vision of her near to him on such a night was sufficient to make him rapturously happy. The world, as he would have expressed it to any one willing to listen to his confidences at the moment, was a ripping place to be in. " Ripping " was a very favourite expression of Ralph Hudson's—his vocabulary to express great emotions was sadly limited but for this adjective—

but, then, on the other hand, it was not often that he suffered from any emotion definite enough to require expression. He enjoyed life placidly and rather as if it was his right. It had been from the first such a comfortable well-ordered existence for him. He was very fond of his people, his old home, his regiment, his horses and dogs, his food and games ; they were all "ripping." He had, in the course of his career, met a number of equally "ripping" women and had been very fond of all of them. Perhaps one or two had loved him. He was a frankly loveable creature, nice to look at, clean, healthy and boyish, three attributes that attract a great many women, though not much is made of them in literature. And now he was twenty-nine, and for the moment Cynthia was something—well, perhaps a little more than "ripping" in his eyes.

He had described her as that for the first month of their acquaintance, when they had met practically every day for tennis, or at tea parties and picnics. Of late he had given up talking about her at all, which was a bad sign had any one been sufficiently interested in him to notice it, and provided they could have honestly said that matrimony would be bad for him. As a matter of fact the gossips of Plymouth were content with the way things were going. Captain Hudson, a nice young man, with quite a comfortable income and a motor car, was going to ask Cynthia Weston, a charming girl living with her sister and looking for a husband, to marry him. Every one knew that—the Colonel, the Major, the subalterns of Captain Hudson's company, the Redwoods, all the female society of Plymouth, Cynthia herself.

Captain Hudson did not know it in so many words, but that was because his capability of putting things into words was limited.

"One of those tiresome men, dear," the Colonel's wife had confided to Mattie, "who think they have proposed by just feeling like it. The only thing for your sister to do is to think so too, and accept him."

Would Cynthia accept him even when he did propose? That was Mattie's anxiety. She did not dare question or probe, but how her heart longed for this achievement to be set as a crown of success on her efforts. Had she searched the world over she could not have found a man more like the kind of husband she wished to see Cynthia married to than Captain Hudson. And Cynthia had been with them nearly a year now; surely she had had more than time to forget. If she could have seen into her sister's mind at this moment as she sat out "Dreaming" with Captain Hudson, Mattie would have got at least an answer to her question. Whether it would have been the one she looked for is open to doubt.

It was curious how far away Cynthia's thoughts were from the present crisis of her life. Vaguely she realized it to be a crisis; she knew that presently this nice man with the pleasant face and frank boyish eyes would ask her to marry him; if not to-night, well then, to-morrow or the next day. What did it matter? The question had been on his lips so often during the last half hour: she knew it was there: he knew that she knew: there was scarce any necessity to put it into words. And for that

matter, just a touch on his arm when they stood up, as they would in a minute—the waltz was nearing an end—just a meeting of their eyes, and the feeling in his heart would sweep them together and he would kiss her. There would be no need for words then ; he was hers, that she knew already ; hers, as securely as any fish well played and brought close to the bank could be.

And now that the game lay in her hands, so to speak, now that a path in life stretched out before her, smooth and well-ordered, comfortable and safe, why this hesitation on her part ? What was in her heart that was making her afraid of the prospect ? This had been the end that she had planned and arranged for—marriage with a man of her own caste and people ; she had been afraid to face life with Ted, afraid for so many reasons. As she had said in her letter to him, hers was a nature that evaded difficulties, and she had known, even before Mattie's weight of argument had been brought to bear on the subject, that life as Ted's wife would be full of difficulties. She had not been sure enough of love to face all the rest unafraid. This new life that was opening before her now would be untroubled by any of the violence or sorrows of love ; she could be very fond of Ralph Hudson, never anything more, she was sure of that. And yet—like the angel with his sword of office who stood to guard Paradise from the sinners—a shadow of remembrance floated between her and this calm vision. Ted's eyes haunted her from the darkness, the touch of his mouth lay on hers, the passion of his whisper breathed in the lilt of the waltz : "I love you."

Even now she had but to hold out her hands, to let her eyes ask their question, and from this other man sitting beside her would come the same answer: "I love you." And his words would mean nothing to her, nothing. Suddenly, vividly, Cynthia realized the truth; that other voice had touched upon some passion in her own heart that had stirred in answer to its call, that throbbed even now with the memory.

She had nothing to give Ralph Hudson; was life, then, to be for her just the selling of her body for the comforts he could offer her, for a good name, a well-ordered house and money? The scorn of her thought flushed her cheeks, yet it is a curious fact that even at that moment she gave no thought to Ralph Hudson and the probable wrong she was meditating to his love. It is more than true that women have very little conscience in these matters.

The last notes of the waltz died away on the air; Ted's face stared at her from her memories. With a little frown of refusal Cynthia jerked the wheel of her thoughts back to the beginning of the argument and stood up.

"I think we had better be getting back," she said. "That is to be the last extra, I heard Colonel Ponsonby say. Mattie may be looking for me."

Captain Hudson stood up slowly; purposely his hand brushed against Cynthia's as they stood together, but some chill spirit of aloofness seemed to have descended on her; she took no notice of it. And after all it was leaving things a little late to cram all he wanted to say into the limited space available between the last extra

and "God Save the King." His question could wait; to-morrow he would tell her; it was worth waiting for.

"Yes," he agreed, "let's go back. It has been a ripping evening, hasn't it, Miss Weston? I wonder if you have enjoyed it as much as I have, or if it bores you sitting out with me."

"Why should I be bored?" asked Cynthia listlessly, her mind and body tired with the whirl of her thoughts.

"Because I am such a rotter at talking," the man answered. "Can't be very amusing to sit out with some one who can only stare at you."

"One doesn't always want to talk," answered Cynthia. They had left the shadows of the trees by now and were crossing the lighted space of lawn where the dancing had been held. "It is one of the proofs of friendship," she reminded him, "when two people can be together without speaking."

"Ripping idea," commented Hudson genuinely. "We are friends, aren't we?" His voice held a note of tenderness.

"I hope so," agreed Cynthia. She paused in her walk and turned to him, her face grave, her eyes troubled. "I want to be friends," she said impetuously; "it is better than being anything else, isn't it?"

Had Hudson been a man of quick words, he would have voiced his thoughts promptly, and said: "It is not so good as being lovers"; as it was, he just looked his disagreement and murmured something to the effect that he supposed it was. Then they turned and resumed their journey across the lawn.

The Ponsonbys were famous everywhere they went for the erratic extravagance of their entertainments. They had, for one thing, a good deal of money, an unusual state of things for people in the army : for another, no children and nothing to spend it on except these outbursts of frivolity that emanated, in the first instance, from Mrs. Ponsonby's brain. Colonel Ponsonby himself was a severe silent man, with grave eyes and a face lined and scored with years and, perhaps, trouble, though of this latter there was very little evidence in his life unless Mrs. Ponsonby could have been described as such. Unkind criticism alluded to Mrs. Ponsonby as mad ; more charitable gossip described her as erratic, but only the few who really knew her realized that her actions were the efforts of a diseased body to hide from herself and her husband how much she suffered. They were, and had always been, all the world to each other. When he had first loved her she had been the eldest of a noisy family of seven ; she had laughed and talked and chattered till his rather too solemn young head had whirled with the intoxication of her wild joy in life. Mad-cap, he had called her in those early days. She lived strenuously, perhaps ridiculously, up to that title in the years that followed. Disappointment crept into her heart ; that they had had no children was a grief that never ceased to hurt, but she hid it assiduously from his eyes. A very large share of pain was her daily portion ; that, too, she masked with laughter ; the bravery of her heart kept her young beside him, because he had loved, first of all, the youth in her. So she wore,

as her critics said, absurdly girlish clothes, surrounded herself with subalterns, and lived in a continual whirl of excitements.

On this occasion she had instituted what she called a "Moonlight Dance." The moon had really very little to do with the illumination, because, for one thing, it is impossible to rely upon the moon in England, and for another, Mrs. Ponsonby's idea of decoration invariably ran to a quantity of Chinese lanterns and fairy lamps. The garden, a more than usually large one, had been transformed into pantomime land; little lights of various colours twinkled from every shrub and tree, lined the paths, and formed a circle, outlining the lawn with its specially erected dancing floor. A tent for refreshments, meant also to provide a sitting-out place for chaperones who might rather dread the charm of the open-air, had been erected at one end of the lawn, whilst the other was occupied by a special blaze of lights and by the band.

Every one seemed to be congregated in the supper tent; a babble of voices and clattering of china and glass greeted Captain Hudson and Cynthia, and several couples looked up and smiled quizzically as they passed. Surely this moonlight dancing would have brought to a head an affair that had been holding off all through the season. Mrs. Ponsonby hailed them hilariously from the centre table, where she had been sitting.

"Come over here, you bad children, I have been keeping two seats for you. Did the gardener disturb you, putting the lights out? Poor Robinson,"—her

conversation, fortunately for Cynthia, flashed on to another tack—"he has been so upset about my decorations; all his pet shrubs and flowers in danger of fire; not hell fire—that is reserved for me as the author of it all—but none the less destructive. He has been out on the prowl all the evening, waiting to put 'them nasty things out'."

The gardener was evidently taking his opportunity now, for even as they sat at supper they could see the countless little flames of coloured lights twinkling and going out. Mrs. Ponsonby sighed.

"What a shame, isn't it?" she said. "I was meditating a stroll with Bob, after you had all gone home, to admire my own handiwork, but Robinson—like Fate—has destroyed my dream."

She laughed a little shrill cackle of amusement and turned her attention to Cynthia again.

"Have you had a good time, dear, with that tiresomely wordless man?"

"Oh, I say," remonstrated Hudson from his side of the table, "that is too bad, Mrs. Ponsonby. Have I been tiresome, Miss Weston?"

"Not more than usual, eh?" put in Mrs. Ponsonby quickly. She patted Cynthia's hand; she could see the girl was tired, and perhaps not quite in the mood for being chaffed, and Mrs. Ponsonby's humour was always very kindly.

Mattie herself did not dare voice the question clamouring for an answer in her mind. Had Captain Hudson proposed? Cynthia's face gave her no clue. At any

rate there could have been no refusal, the young man's "Good-night," his eager "Well, then, you will come to-morrow, won't you?" showed that. She carried Cynthia's candle upstairs for her and stood hesitating in the door after "good-nights" had been exchanged.

"You have had a good time, dear?" she ventured somewhat wistfully.

Cynthia, pulling off her long white gloves in front of the mirror, nodded without raising her head. "It has been a very jolly dance, hasn't it?" she agreed.

"Well, good-night again," acquiesced Mattie. "You must be tired, dear; I hope you will sleep well."

Cynthia stood with head still bent for a minute or two after the closing of the door proclaimed Mattie's departure. She was a little ashamed of herself. How cold and horrid she was to Mattie sometimes, it was as if everything within her had been frozen to a hard lump. But after all Captain Hudson had not proposed; that was what Mattie was waiting to hear, and there had been nothing really to tell her. With a quick movement, almost defiant in the action, she lifted her head and stared at herself in the glass.

"Ted wouldn't know me like this," was the thought that stirred in her mind. The shimmer of her white gown, the pearls round her neck and in her hair, were infinitely becoming. "He has never seen me in evening dress; he would like me, I think."

The defiance and anger crept from her face, leaving it white and childish.

"And it is this kind of thing that pushes me from

him," she went on. "It's the mark of the difference that there is between us."

Her lips quivered a little on the words, and she began her undressing slowly, but got only as far as taking off her necklace and the pearls out of her hair. Then she paused again, and again her eyes met her vision in the glass. This time the sight brought a throb of intolerable memory. "Ted, Ted," she whispered, and put up her hands to shut the mirror out. She would have liked to creep away into some dark corner, like an animal that has been hurt, hiding from the light; but her knees suddenly seemed to fail her, so she crouched down where she was, her beautiful dress forgotten, and with her head against the hard wood of the dressing-table began to cry—hot scorching tears that brought very little comfort to her heart.

No one guessed or knew of those tears. Next afternoon Cynthia went for a drive with Captain Hudson in his motor car, finished up at the Mess for tea, and came home engaged. Hudson proposed, practically at the last moment of course, over the tea cups. It was a somewhat embarrassing place to have chosen, because a great many people were having tea in the Mess ante-room, but in a way that was a relief to Cynthia. She studied his bent head, the flushed bit of his brow that she could see, his nervous hands twisting and untwisting a corner of the table-cloth, while he spoke; and when he had finished and raised his head to meet her eyes he was too excited himself to notice anything wrong in the unmoved whiteness of her face.

"It is going to be yes, isn't it?" he whispered, bending towards her, oblivious for the moment of any one who might be looking.

Cynthia nodded. "Yes, if you really care about it," she answered. "You will find me a disappointing person I am afraid."

"I shan't," contradicted Hudson vehemently. He put his hand, just for one second, on her knee under the table. "You darling! you are absolutely ripping, I am sure of that."

Then some chance acquaintance thoughtlessly joined them and stayed talking until Cynthia decided it was time to go home.

Hudson left the motor at the gate of the Redwoods' garden, on the plea that it was a difficult turning in such a bad light, and got out to walk up the drive with Cynthia. She could hear him breathing a little hard beside her and knew him to be nerving himself to claim what, since they were engaged, was his right. When he turned and caught her to him, she yielded stiffly. Her lips under his were cold and unresponsive, but for a moment or two he did not realize this; only her aloofness made him a little ashamed of the warmth of his desire. He let her go presently and voiced his trouble.

"Cynthia," his voice was a little shaky, "don't you love me?"

No—no—no, her heart clamoured: her lips formed a more diplomatic reply.

"I don't quite know," she said. "The truth is, that I hate being kissed, and that is why I said you would find

me disappointing." She hesitated a moment, her eyes looking beyond him to where she could see the lights of the house twinkling. Mattie was probably in the drawing room : Mattie, to whom this engagement would bring such quiet solid content : Mattie, whom she had so often hurt, to whom she owed so much. " But I do want to love you," she went on, " if you will be content with my failure in that respect. Perhaps one day I shall like it." She pressed nearer to him, hiding her face on his shoulder. He could feel her shiver and he drew her to him quickly.

Her plea silenced him. Of course he was content for the time being, and thinking it over to himself afterwards, he discovered that her outlook was after all very satisfactory. Other women had been too eager to kiss him ; it was right that Cynthia, the one woman of his life who was to be his wife, should be a little more difficult to win ; it made her all the more worth winning.

Their engagement was announced that evening to the Redwoods ; in a week it had appeared in the papers, and all Plymouth knew the fact accomplished at last.

" It is a weight off our chests," chuckled Major Redwood—he had had one short and entirely satisfactory interview with the young man—" handing that sister of yours over to some one else to look after. He is not a stunning genius, Hudson, but he is no fool." Something in his wife's utter silence made him glance at her. " What is up, old lady ? Aren't you satisfied yet ?"

Mattie rose quickly and walked to the window. " I suppose I am," she said ; " he is nice, and good, and——"

"What has the girl said to you?" asked Major Redwood with a sigh.

Mattie turned round slowly. "Cynthia has only made one remark to me on the subject," she admitted, "and that was on the evening they got engaged. I went into her room after we had all gone to bed, oh, just to say good-night again, and to see with my own eyes that she was happy. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, hugging one foot as she used to do when she was a kiddie and had been sent to her room for being naughty. And something in her eyes made me want to run to her and take her into my arms and hug her, and yet I couldn't. So I just stayed where I was stupidly, and said: 'What are you thinking about, Cynthia?'"

"Well?" asked Major Redwood.

"She just looked up at me," Mattie went on, "such a funny little don't-mind-what-I-say look, and answered: 'I was thinking he was worth £900 dead or alive.'"

Major Redwood burst into a relieved guffaw. "Sensible girl!" His face sobered: "Not romantic enough for you, Mattie; is that the trouble?"

Mattie had turned to the window again. There was a mist of tears before her eyes, and she was not anxious her husband should notice it.

"I don't want her to be romantic," she answered slowly, "but I did want her to be happy."

The verb had gone into the past tense almost instinctively. Already Mattie knew that her desire had not been accomplished.

CHAPTER XX

IF ONE IS BRAVE

"**I**F one is brave," Claire Sinclair said, and in the very saying of it laughed derisively, "one choses this way out."

She pushed a small silver-plated revolver across the table towards Elsie. "If one is brave," she repeated, and again she laughed.

The two girls sat in one of the top floor front rooms of Mrs. MacNab's house. Not a bad-sized room but drab and uncomfortable looking, the walls dingy, the furniture old and evidently much used. The window was half open, though outside a grey chill fog held the atmosphere, and, early in the afternoon as it was, the room was lit by a flickering gas jet, the burner of which had at some time or other been broken. Elsie sat on the edge of the bed, her feet swinging, her hands clenched in her lap, staring at the tiny little glittering toy her companion had just produced. She was dressed to go

out, her clothes smart and well fitting, a dead-white large-brimmed hat throwing a soft shade over her face and neck. Viewed from a little distance she seemed extraordinarily young and fresh looking ; she had to be under a more brilliant light than this before the lines of paint and powder became visible on her face. Her eyes were tired and yet singularly alert ; the aggressive tilt of her chin had been moulded and hardened into set defiance of the world and the people of the world.

Her companion, Claire Sinclair, who sat in the one chair the room boasted of, was far more vividly beautiful than Elsie could ever be. She possessed that delicate beauty which lives triumphant in some women, no matter how deep the mire of their lives may be. Nothing could wipe the seeming innocence from Claire's eyes, with their long lashes that edged them like a fringe of shadow ; no harsh line of paint could disfigure the beautifully-shaped lips. She, too, was well dressed, in a close-fitting blue silk dress, open rather low at the neck, and edged with a white lace ruffle. Claire always wore a quantity of jewellery and ridiculously small, absurdly placed hats—the two things about her that gave away her character, so to speak. But even with them she was radiantly, undeniably beautiful.

“ Well ? ” she questioned sharply now, looking up at Elsie and putting out her hand to recover her toy, “ don't you agree with me, Elsie, or have you found a better solution to our problem ? ”

Elsie did not lift her eyes from the revolver. “ And —if one is not brave ? ” she said slowly.

"Oh, in that case,"—Claire spoke nimbly—"which I may remark is not generally the way with us women, either we die as Mamie died last week—did you see her before they carted her off in the hospital ambulance?—or we live like old Mrs. MacNab. Or"—she pulled the revolver back again and shoved it into the handbag she carried, "we marry, as I am going to marry, some man too sodden with drink to know what he is doing." She shivered theatrically and pressed her much jewelled fingers against her face.

Elsie watched her. She was never quite certain how much Claire really felt the undoubted horrors of her life.

"Is that—thing—loaded?" she asked presently.

Claire took her hands away and stared indignantly. "Of course it is," she said. "You think I am playing at this, Elsie. I swear before God, if there is a God, that if John Durrant doesn't marry me to-morrow, I shall shoot myself. I can't go on, my God, I can't go on." She rose quickly and moved about the room remembering, even in that intense moment, to put her hat straight before the glass.

Elsie shifted her position a little. "If he is like what you say," she ventured, "what do you gain by marrying him?"

"What do I gain?"—Claire swung round laughing shrilly. "What would you, and I, and women like us, give their everything for? Why, the outskirts of respectability, a name and a house. He is not badly off, you know."

"But——" began Elsie. Claire waved her to silence.

"Hush," she said, "don't be a fool and rush in where angels even might fear to tread: You don't understand. Well, how should you?" She came back and sat on the bed by Elsie, laying one bejewelled hand on the girl's arm. "I'll tell you though, because, for one thing, I like you, and for another, I want you to help me through this. I have got a child, Elsie, a little girl, she is about four years old now." The beautiful face softened, the lips trembled, real tears were near Claire's eyes. "She is a pretty little kid, too. Sometimes I run down to see her. She is boarded out in the country you know. Her coming pushed me into this life. For her sake I want to try and scramble out; I could not let her grow up and find me like this. I have called her Joy, so like me and so inappropriate, isn't it?"

She sat silent for a second, then her clasp on Elsie tightened and she drew herself a little nearer.

"I want you to come with me to-night," she went on "to Durrant's flat. He has promised to marry me; he must be made to go through with it. If there are two of us there he will be easier to manage. Elsie, you will help me, won't you? It is for the kid, honestly it is for the kid. Otherwise, do you think I would bother?"

"I think I know it is for the baby," Elsie agreed. She got off the bed slowly, an ache of memory at her heart. "I'll come, Claire, though I don't really see what use I can be."

Claire was rubbing the tears vigorously from her eyes with a small handkerchief.

"You are a brick," she said. "I knew you would stick by me. Well, at nine, then. Will you meet me there? You know his place, don't you—4 Denton Street; just come right up." She slipped off the bed and across the room to the other girl. "If he is very awful to-night, don't try and stop me from doing it, will you? I must go through with it—must, you understand?"

Elsie nodded. "Yes," she said, "I understand."

Claire had caught sight of her own face beside Elsie's in the mirror.

"What a fright I have made of myself," she muttered discontentedly. "Will have to go and do my hair again, I suppose. Damn!" Her attention wandered to Elsie. "As we are on confidences," she asked, "what pushed you here, dear, into our life? I mean, you don't look as if——"

"Does it matter?" interrupted Elsie. She drew away. "It is near the truth to say I came because I wanted to. I am afraid I have no other excuse."

"I suppose Joy is an excuse," Claire agreed. "All right, dear, I won't pry." She picked up her belongings—gloves, bag and handkerchief—and crossed to the door. "Don't fail me, though, at nine to-night."

The door closed behind her and Elsie, left alone, stood staring round her undecidedly. Five o'clock sounded from a neighbouring church; the fog seemed to have deepened and settled a little more firmly down outside. There was no need to go out since her evening

was mapped out for her; that in itself was a relief. She put up her hands, and taking off her hat flung it carelessly on to the bed. She would stay where she was until 8.30, not even go downstairs for the evening meal, a horrible institution which generally took place about seven. She could not face the probable gathering to-day; she was so bitterly, so hopelessly tired of them all.

Of late things had gone badly with Elsie. It is a hard and—to those desirous of doing exactly as they please in this life—an unpalatable fact that there is no joy to be found in the world which can compare with the joy of a clear conscience and a good life. The saying—often heard on the lips of the young—"Be good, and you will be happy, but you won't have a good time"—is wrong. "Be bad, and you may have an exciting time, but you certainly won't be happy" is more correct. And even that does not quite get at the truth, for the meaning of words is a terribly intricate thing. Goodness and badness mean something totally different from every one's point of view, but, however we look at it, we shall find in the long run that the old definition—to be gathered from action and result—is generally correct. Goodness brings happiness: badness—misery.

Perhaps in the old days, when the Gods walked the earth—and were, incidentally, infinitely evil in their doings—when the whole world of mankind lay nearer to Nature and could feel her great stormy heart beating through their lives, there may have been something radiantly glorious about vice. At least, if report be true,

she walked abroad in more regal and triumphant garb than she does nowadays, but whether her followers were any the happier for her splendid raiment is to be doubted. In the world to-day, vice certainly wears no crown or robe of state, and those who serve her pay a heavy toll in misery, shame and degradation.

So Elsie paid it, drugging thought and conscience, for as long as she could, with passion, till the drug failed and the taste of it was bitter in her mouth. Sometimes she felt as if she had stepped aside from the plain, straight path of life into a vast quagmire—each step she took sucked her deeper in ; each instinctive struggle to free herself brought the loathsome filth of the place closer against her heart. If she stood still it crept slowly upon her ; in time it would submerge her, close over her head in oily thick waves and her place would be left free for another. What was it Claire had said ?—“ If one is brave ”—but courage had been dragged from Elsie, she had lost it finally when she had refused to face the blankness of her life on the high road.

Her thoughts veered round to Claire again, poor pretty Claire ; life must be even worse for her. And yet, somehow, Elsie felt that if she had had a little child, a tiny life to guard and care for, to spend her love on, she would not have gone under as she was going now ; she would have held her head high and fought the world. Claire claimed that the baby's coming had pushed her into this life ; that could not be altogether true. The world might look upon a child born under such circumstances as an emblem of sin ; if one's heart

was true, if knowledge of Love—blind and mistaken, perhaps, but still love, lay behind its coming, surely there was nothing in that to drag one into the pit.

At eight o'clock, after heating a little milk for herself on a spirit lamp, and nibbling a biscuit by way of supper, Elsie changed her coat and skirt, and selecting a small black satin hat as being the least noticeable thing she could wear, sallied out to keep her appointment with Claire. Denton Street, an unpretentious-looking opening off Shaftesbury Avenue, was a quiet thoroughfare even in the busiest times of the day. It boasted no shops and very few offices ; its length was occupied, on one side, by a block of flats, and on the other by the back premises of some large warehouse establishment. After the bustle of traffic in Shaftesbury Avenue, it seemed a dismally lit, depressing place, and the fog, defeated to a certain extent in the larger street by the blaze of lights from restaurants and theatres, gathered here thick and uninterrupted, a pall of moist darkness.

Elsie had some little difficulty in finding the number of the flat she required. It turned out to be in the end block, and, according to the number indicator in the badly lit hall, Mr Durrant occupied the third-floor flat on the left hand side. The lift box was unoccupied, and, one or two rings eliciting no response, Elsie resigned herself to climbing up the three flights of stairs. She was desperately out of breath by the time she reached her destination, and waited a minute or two leaning against the stair rail before knocking at

the door. How quiet the place was; did no one but Claire's friend live in this cold stone building? It was a depressing setting for what she knew must be a tragedy of drink and degradation.

Even as the thought crossed her mind the silence was broken, and the noise of voices raised in altercation reached her from behind the door she was just about to knock on. One she recognized as Claire's, shrill and beyond control, pouring out what seemed to be a stream of hysterical abuse; the other, low and undistinguishable, a man's drunken growl. With her hand on the door, which yielded unlatched to her touch, Elsie hesitated, waiting for the quarrel to subside a little before she should put in an appearance. Evidently the man was very drunk; he was probably proving intractable. Claire, strung up as she was, would have very little control over a temper which was at the best of times unmanageable.

"You shall go through with it now," she was half screaming. "You great drunken brute, do you think I'll let you push me aside at the last moment because some other face takes your fancy? You've promised me, my God, how often have you sworn, by everything you held sacred, to marry me, and now you shall. Do you hear what I say, you shall—shall—shall."

Her voice rose piercingly on the silence; if any one was in the house it would certainly be heard. Elsie slipped inside and latched the door behind her; that would shut in a certain amount of the noise, though, for that matter, drunken rows of this description were

probably too common to attract much attention.

The passage of the flat was in complete darkness, but from under a door at the end a thin flicker of light streamed. As she made her way towards it Elsie was brought up suddenly by a sound that for the moment drove the blood from her heart and left her, terror-stricken and unable to move, crouching against the wall. It came after some muttered growl of the man's—the thin sharp report of a revolver, the thud of a heavy body striking the floor, the horrible noise of some one choking on the thick blood which rises to the throat when a man has been shot through the lungs, succeeded by tense, terrible silence. When she could move, feeling her way by the wall, for fright had taken all the strength from her knees, Elsie stumbled along the passage and pushed the door open.

Claire stood with her back to the table in the centre of the room, her arms by her side, her eyes wide and staring. The little glittering revolver that she had shown to Elsie earlier in the day was still clutched in one of her hands. Her eyes met Elsie's across the space of the room and over the thing that lay between them—a huddled shapeless body, with a thin stream of red oozing from under the cheek that had fallen against the floor.

"I have killed him," she whispered stiffly, "killed him." The revolver dropped from her hand; she ran towards the body on the floor, turning it over, attempting to mop up the pool of blood with her ridiculously small handkerchief. "I didn't mean to do it," she asserted

over and over again, "not this; I didn't mean to do it." The man's head fell back, slack and resistless, the bloated features, ghastly in their pallor, smeared with great splotches of blood.

"He laughed at me, Elsie," the agonized voice went on; "he had found another girl, he said; he chose her in preference to me. He would have it that he had never meant to marry me, and I——" her face quivered, she thrust the body from her and sprang up, stumbling across the room to Elsie, catching desperately at the other girl's hands. "You know why I wanted to marry him, don't you? You said you understood. It was for Joy. Oh, what will happen to her now, my little, little baby? Shall I be hanged, Elsie? Will they hang me? Don't let them do it! Hide me, Elsie, hide me." She broke into loud crying, each sob almost a scream of terror, and fell on her knees at Elsie's feet, clutching at her dress.

Elsie stooped to her. "Hush," she entreated. "Hush, Claire. You must be quiet, dear, we must think of something to do or say before they come. Some one will have heard the shot. They will be sure to come. They shan't take you. We must find a way out, you have got Joy to think of. If anything happens to me there will be no one in the world to care. Look, Claire,"—she pulled the shivering girl to her feet—"your dress is all smeared with blood; slip out of it quickly, dear; change with me. We are about the same size. Then do you know any way out of this? You must find one if you can and get away as quickly

and quietly as possible. Don't cry or scream any more, for pity's sake, there is such a lot to be done."

"But you?" Claire asked. Mechanically she was obeying the clearer mind, the stronger will, and was already half out of her dress. "What will you do, how will you get away?"

"What does it matter," Elsie answered feverishly. "There is no one that I need bother about. Why, only to-day I was envying you your possession of that revolver and wondering if I could have the courage to borrow it and use it. This will be a way out for me, don't you understand, Claire, a way out that I should never have had the pluck to find for myself."

She fastened the last hook in Claire's dress, and, taking off her own hat, pushed it well down over the other girl's head.

"Now go, go quickly," she urged; "some one is coming. Do you know of a back way?"

Claire nodded. "There is a fire escape stairway at the back of his bedroom," she said. A succession of quick knocks was heard on the outside door, she crouched against Elsie. "I can't go alone and leave you; it isn't fair or right."

"Oh, don't argue," begged Elsie; "just go. I would do it if I were in your shoes and there were a little baby to be thought of. Do I look frightened or distressed about it? I tell you I am glad, glad to have found a way out."

She pushed Claire from her. "Now go," she repeated. "I am going to open the door and I shall

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tell them that I did it. You will only seem to be an hysterical, frightened idiot if you stay and try to contradict me. Please, just go as quick as ever you can."

She moved towards the hall; a man's voice could be heard outside shouting for admittance. With one shuddering glance at the thing on the floor and a moment of undecided hesitation, Claire, gathering Elsie's dress round her, ran to the door of the bedroom and vanished through it. Elsie could hear some further door open and shut, and then, without looking again at the man she was supposed to have murdered, or at the dropped weapon on the floor, she passed down the passage and flung open the front door.

CHAPTER XXI

A FRIEND

FROM the very first the one person to doubt Elsie's story was James Douglas, a barrister and a sometime friend of Durrant's, who lived in the flat underneath and had been the first to give the alarm. Douglas had known Durrant ever since their early school days, and he had grown too used to the goings on in the upper flat to be very seriously alarmed at the first sound of the quarrel. The report of a pistol and the fall of what was evidently a heavy body had startled him however, and slipping an overcoat over his pyjamas—he had retired to bed particularly early that evening with a book he was interested in—he had run upstairs and hammered imperatively on Durrant's door. That eliciting no response, he had grown seriously alarmed and had dashed out, clad as he was, to capture the nearest policeman's attention.

"Murder, is that what you are afraid of?" the man had questioned bluntly as they panted up the three flights.

"Something of that sort," agreed Douglas. "Heard a shot fired, anyway."

"Respectable occupants?" asked the policeman.

That was the last word that could be applied to Durrant. "A little noisy," Douglas owned briefly, "and very often drunk."

"Humph!" grunted the policeman. Then he lifted his truncheon and thumped authoritatively on the door. "Come along now, whoever is in there, open this door and hurry up over it."

The response to his summons, considering Douglas' repeated efforts, was very rapid. Before the man had even time to try the door again it was flung open. A girl stood facing them, slight, with pale, defiant face, and stiff erect carriage. She had no hat on; her hair parted at the side lay close and smooth to her head; she was like some boy, Douglas thought, a boy masquerading in woman's clothes. Then his eyes dropped from her face to the pale blue of the gown she wore, and with a thrill of horror he saw the vivid red splashes of wet blood clinging to the silk.

The policeman had seen them too, his professional eye quick to catch their meaning. With a brisk movement he pushed past Douglas and laid a heavy hand on the girl's shoulder.

"There has been trouble here, my girl; better let us look into it quietly."

The quick blood flew to Elsie's cheeks. She resented the man's touch, his air of authority, and at that moment she caught sight of Douglas's keen face, the horror in his eyes. Her own held his while she answered, and to him it seemed that their very directness gave the lie to every word she spoke.

"Yes," she admitted, "there has been trouble. I have killed a man, at least I think he is dead. Will you come with me? I will take you to him."

She turned, the policeman's hand still like a vice on her arm, and led the way back to the dining-room. James Douglas followed, bewildered thoughts thronging his mind. Never, in his fairly long career of investigation into crimes, had he met a man, let alone a woman, who could remain so calm and seemingly indifferent to so terrible an acknowledgment.

Durrant was dead, right enough. Douglas and the policeman verified that while the girl stood, silent and unmoved, watching them.

"He deserved to die," she said quietly. It seemed as if she addressed her answer to Douglas alone, ignoring the policeman. "I am not sorry to have done it."

He deserved to die! Douglas could believe that. Durrant had always been a foul-minded, low living brute. Even as a schoolboy, he had been hated and despised by his companions; as a man, drink, and things worse than drink, had reduced him to the level of insanity. Undoubtedly he might have deserved death, but that this girl, this quiet-spoken, clear-eyed girl should have killed him, was unthinkable!

"What had we better do?" he asked briefly of the policeman. "Will you stay here while I notify the police, or do you like to leave me in charge and fetch them yourself?"

"That will be the best, sir, if you don't object," agreed the policeman; glancing at Elsie. "Shall we

tie her up before I go, or do you reckon you can manage with her?"

"Of course I can," answered Douglas curtly. He hated to see the colour flame and fade in the girl's face at every hint of disgrace. It was impossible, quite impossible, that she should ever really have had sufficient connexion with a man like Durrant to warrant her killing him. He knew most of Durrant's women-kind. He had been fetched in by one or other of them on more than one occasion, either to control Durrant from murder, or to restore Durrant to consciousness after a more than usually severe bout of dissipation. This girl he had never seen before; she was not even of the type that would have appealed to Durrant. Could it be revenge—revenge for some other girl, a friend or a sister, perhaps? There might be a thousand good reasons of that sort for the deed.

"Do you care to tell me at all why you did it?" he asked after the policeman had taken his departure. "I don't want to seem merely inquisitive. I am a lawyer, you know. You will want some one to act for you in this case. Unless you know of some one whom you would prefer, will you let me do what I can to help you? I knew the dead man. When you say that he deserved to die I know that you are speaking the truth; that is my excuse. It will help you to tell me."

Elsie moved a little. She had sat down on the chair he had pushed forward for her, her arms lay along the table, the hands loosely clasped.

"You are very kind," she said simply, "but I am not going to defend myself now or ever. I don't know why I said he deserved to die, except that something in your eyes made me want to explain away some of the horror."

"But you will have to state something," he argued, "make up some tale if your story is to be believed."

She raised startled eyes to his. "Believed," she repeated quickly. "They won't want more proof than this, will they?" Her eyes fell before his. When she raised them again they were steady; she was facing her situation, whatever it was, very calmly. "I had plenty of excuse," she went on somewhat as if she were reciting a lesson. "He was to have married me to-morrow; there were certain reasons why I wished him to." Her glance met his defiantly. "When I called this evening he told me he had changed his mind. He taunted me with some other woman whom he had chosen in preference to me, and I—I lost my temper, I suppose, and fired at him. He dropped back just as you see him now." He saw her hands clench on the table. "Will they be very much longer in coming back?" she asked.

"You wanted him to marry you?" Douglas asked, fixing on what was to him the absolute impossibility of the subject.

The girl seemed to wince a little from the incredulity of his voice. "There were reasons," she repeated dully. "He was breaking his promises. I am not sorry that he is dead."

That was all that he could get from her. A tissue

of lies, he thought; but the why and the wherefore of her lying remained a mystery, and in the face of such glaring evidence as the circumstances in which she was found, the blood on her dress, the tenacity with which she stuck to her claim to the deed, made him chary of voicing his disbelief. But he could not get the fact of it from his mind, nor indeed the memory of her straight, slim figure, her half-boyish face, the smooth, parted hair. He had never in his life been so interested in or thought so persistently about any woman. The desire to help her, to get her free from the web of circumstance that was closing in on her, became an obsession with him. He could neither work, nor sleep, nor rest, for thinking of her.

He entered his name as willing and anxious to act for the defence, and incidentally, in the gathering of knowledge for the case, got to know as much of Elsie's life as Mrs. MacNab or any of her other companions could tell him. Claire was the only person who might inadvertently have given the truth away to his keen eyes, and Claire was away, staying in the country, confined to her bed with what the village doctor called "Nervous breakdown." The others knew nothing.

"We are all free agents here," Mrs. MacNab explained to him briskly. "I never ask the girls to confide in me. Elsie was never the one to buck about her men. But I can tell you that there has been something preying on her mind for quite a month."

It gave Douglas a shock to find out how and where Elsie lived; but even that did not shake his belief in her

innocence, neither did it in any way crush back the feeling for her that was growing in his heart.

He had one or two interviews with her in prison while they waited for the trial to come up for hearing, and on each and every occasion Elsie met him with the same barrier of determined defiance, and with the same oft-repeated story.

"I don't believe a single word of it," he stated definitely in their final interview. "Why are you building up this mountain of lies? Whom are you trying to shield behind it?"

"Will it matter to the others what you believe?" she asked.

"I will do my level best to influence them to my view of the case," he answered hotly. "I believe you want them to bring in 'Guilty.'"

"I do," she agreed. "I am guilty. When one has done something wrong in this world it is better to get the paying of it finished with. You don't know how glad I shall be when it is finished."

"It shan't finish on 'Guilty' if I can help it," he stormed back. "Have you no relations or any one in the whole wide world, that you can think like that? Have you considered what it may mean to them?"

Elsie lifted calm eyes to his. "Does any one love women like us?" she answered. "You have found out about me, haven't you?"—the colour flew to his face—"Why are you asking such a stupid question?"

It was after that and just before the case came on

for hearing, that Douglas caused her picture to be widely circulated in the papers, still refusing to believe that there was no one to be found to come forward and argue with Elsie. The manoeuvre brought him at least one immediate reply.

"She has got quite a nice face, the unfortunate girl, who is accused in this horrible murder case," said Mattie one day, perusing the paper as was her wont in the quarter of an hour before lunch while the table was being laid. "Have you seen it, Cynthia?"

"No, I hadn't time to look at the paper this morning," Cynthia answered. She stood by the window, still in her outdoor things, drumming with her fingers on the pane. There was only a fortnight now before her wedding; there were times when Cynthia felt like some bird caught in a net may feel as it sees the meshes gathered together in the hand of the capturer.

"He must have been awful to her," Mattie went on. The pictured face, one of Elsie taken in the very early days of her girlhood and unearthed by Douglas from the limbo of her possessions, touched Mattie to a quick sense of compassion. "Poor girl!" she laid the paper down with a sigh, and the family trooped in for lunch, concluding with Major Redwood, who always went to wash his hands after the bell had rung and was consequently invariably five minutes late for every meal.

"What are the amusements for this afternoon?" he inquired cheerily, ensconcing himself behind the leg of mutton that required carving.

"I have got a sewing meeting and mothers' tea on,"

admitted Mattie. "Cynthia is going out with Ralph, aren't you?"

"Yes," agreed Cynthia. "Not till after tea, though, I have such heaps of letters to get through this afternoon."

"Well, as no one seems to be going to amuse me," Major Redwood commented, "I shall dig potatoes in the back garden. How is the kitten, Beatrice?" He turned his attention to the smallest member of the family, who with earnest face and a rapt expression was ploughing her way through a somewhat large helping of pudding.

"Hush, daddie," Mattie put in quickly, she had already been the consoler of floods of tears over this same kitten; "there has been a tragedy; we don't talk about it yet!"

"Dear, dear, how sad—sorry I spoke," said Major Redwood. His small daughter continued her operations against the pudding undeterred by the slow tears that trickled down her fat nose and splashed on her plate.

"Mummy, please tell him," she managed to confide presently in a stage whisper, after a gulp of sorrow and pudding combined, "about Tootles."

"You see, it is Tootles that really minds," Mattie explained; "Beatrice was going to have been brave and not cry any more about it, only Tootles is under the table, and Beatrice thinks that every time Tootles hears the deceased infant mentioned it cuts into her heart like a knife. It was quite all right this time, darling," she consoled, "because Tootles didn't really hear daddy, she is ever so fast asleep beside my foot."

The child's face brightened, the last tears vanishing in the magical way that April showers vanish before the sun.

"I am glad he was asleep,"—Beatrice could never be persuaded to allude to the cat mother as she—"he does feel it so terribly, mummie."

Cynthia took the paper upstairs to her room after lunch, deciding in her own mind that she would lie down and read it for a quarter of an hour before starting on her letters. Elsie's picture was on the fourth page, and Cynthia did not come to it until the reading was almost finished. In the ordinary course of events she would merely have glanced at it and laid it aside; the reproduction was not a specially good one, and did not clamour for recognition; but the memory of Mattie's remarks made Cynthia turn back to the picture a second time, and on closer inspection it took her only a second to realize the likeness.

It was Elsie. Elsie in prison, on trial for murder! Elsie to have killed a man, to have gone through what this girl must have gone through before driven to kill. All the papers, when reporting the murder, had hinted vaguely at the horrors that probably lay behind the deed. And Elsie was bearing it all alone; the paper mentioned that she had apparently neither relations nor friends; from the very first it appeared she had quite calmly and coldly admitted to the deed and refused all information as to herself. In less than the space of time necessary to realize all these thoughts, Cynthia had made up her mind. She would go to

London: at least Elsie should know of one friend in her hour of trial. Cynthia had not the slightest idea of what she could do to help, or of how to set about it, her one idea was to get to London as quickly as possible, to be near—if possible to see Elsie.

It was a quarter to three; if she hurried, just stopping to pack only a few absolute necessities in her small bag, she could catch the afternoon express to London. She could wire to Miss Powell to put her up for a night or two. Miss Powell had lived for twelve years in 24, White's Avenue—it was unlikely that she would have moved.

London—suddenly the thick veil of tragedy split, a ray of brilliant hope illuminated it. Ted was in London, she would go to Ted. Ted would help her to see Elsie.

At three o'clock, her bag clutched in her hand, Cynthia was in the back garden attempting to explain to Major Redwood the absolute necessity for her abrupt departure.

"Heh, what's all this?" he had ejaculated at her first announcement, digging himself stiffly from the arduous task of digging potatoes. "London, now at once! Have you gone mad?"

"I haven't much time to explain," Cynthia answered. "Please do listen, so that you can tell Mattie. This girl, Elsie Hart, who is charged with this flat murder, is the girl I lived with in London. We were friends; I must go to her, see what I can do to help. I think Mattie will understand. Tell her, please, that I have gone to White's Avenue. Miss Powell, a lady who lives there, will put me up. I shall be quite,

quite all right. Mattie is not to worry, and I will send a wire saying I have arrived."

"But——" protested Major Redwood, face flushed and angry.

"Oh, please don't argue with me," interrupted Cynthia, "I must go, that is all."

"What about Hudson?" expostulated her brother-in-law as he gave chase up the garden path. "What the thunder am I to tell him?"

"Anything you like," called back Cynthia. She paused a moment and faced round. "No, wait—you had better not tell him about Elsie; say that an aunt of mine or some one is ill."

On the way up in the train it is to be believed that her thoughts turned more on Ted than on Elsie. Only now, with some prospect of seeing him in front of her again, did she realize how the ache of wanting him had been eating into her heart. The whole face of the world was changed since seeing Ted again lay in front of her. Ralph Hudson and her prospective marriage were entirely forgotten. With the ridiculousness and inconsistency of love, her whole being thrilled and pulsed with elation, despite the real cause of her journey. Her eyes were radiant, she was going back to Ted; each turn of the wheel sang his name over and over again to her heart.

Miss Powell was at the station to meet her, austere but kind as ever. "Got your wire," she grunted. "Need not ask what this sudden craze is, I suppose?"

"It is Elsie," explained Cynthia frankly. She

sat forward in the cab, peering out of the window. How good it was to be back in London; she knew now that she had always been homesick for these crowded streets, this noisy traffic.

"I thought as much," Miss Powell's disapproving voice broke in on her meditations. "What do you 'hink you are going to be able to do?"

"I don't know," admitted Cynthia; "but I just felt I had to be near her."

Miss Powell was silent a minute or two; apparently her thoughts ran on charitable lines, for presently she sighed and patted Cynthia's hand. "Perhaps you have done right," she conceded; "the poor girl is paying a heavy price for her folly."

Before she turned in to occupy the camp bedstead put up for her use in Miss Powell's front sitting-room, Cynthia wrote a letter to Ted; to Mattie, she eased her conscience with a wire.

"Dear Ted," she wrote, "I have no right to bother you, no claim of any sort upon your kindness; and yet I am writing this with the full knowledge that if I ask you will give. I have come to London because Elsie is the girl that has been arrested for the murder in Denton Street. I want if I can to help her, at least to see her; will you help me to do this, for I have no idea how to set about it? To-morrow is Saturday: will you meet me as soon after one as you can manage, at what used to be our corner in St. James' Park? Please, please, come."

She had so much more to tell him, but nothing

that she could put into a letter—it could wait till she saw him, till her hands lay once more in his, till his eyes could help her with the telling; she never doubted that he would come.

That night she was haunted by terrible dreams; Ted was dead, she fancied: his white, set face floated before her in a pool of blood. In some way she had killed him, it was she who had been arrested for murder, not Elsie. She stood in the dock, a dream court of justice, for there were heavy manacles on her feet and hands, and the judge, terrible and awe-inspiring, with a festoon of skulls over his red robe, glared at her across the dead body of Ted. "You have murdered this man," he seemed to shriek at her, "murdered him; what is your answer, guilty or not guilty?" The dream court was full of eyes staring at her. She shrank from them. "Not guilty," she whispered; but she was convinced that no one had heard her, so for the next sentence she too raised her voice to a scream. "How could I have done it? I loved him—won't you understand, I loved him."

Whether they understood or not remained a mystery, for at that juncture Miss Powell shook her awake.

"You are having a nightmare about love," she remonstrated; "don't sleep on your back, child."

The judge's accusation and her plea went with Cynthia into her next sleep. After all, what had her love done for Ted? That remained to be seen.

CHAPTER XXII

CYNTHIA GOES BACK

UP to five minutes before the time appointed by Cynthia, Ted Hunter remained firm in his intention of not acceding to her request. Cynthia's desire to see him, apart from what he could do to help her where Elsie was concerned, was probably merely a continuation of the game that had apparently so delighted her in the first instance—the game of extracting a coy periwinkle from his shell with a pin. The amusement had hurt him sufficiently for a whole lifetime, and he had no wish or thought or hope to see her again. But he had not ceased to love her; that was why all arguments of pride and caution and self-respect were thrown to the winds; they had no weight against his need for her, and in the end, of course, he went.

Only he was a little late. Cynthia had been waiting for half an hour. Such a thing had never occurred to

her before: in the old days she had always arrived to find Ted waiting for her—however early she came, he had always been there half an hour before. Nervousness succeeded anticipation; the minutes crawled past like hours; she had no idea of time, she only knew that there she would stay, all day perhaps, if he did not come; what did anything matter if he did not come?

A desolate fear invaded Cynthia's heart. Perhaps Ted was dead, as her dream of the night had foretold, and all her joy at coming back to London turned to black despair. Ted was dead, she would never see him or touch him or hear him again.

In the very middle of that thought Cynthia lifted her eyes and saw Ted. He was coming slowly down the path towards her; even in her state of agitation she could notice how white and ill he looked. Then, with a little cry, and regardless of passers-by, she ran to meet him.

"Ted, Ted," she whispered—he could see her eyes were swimming with tears, of which she was not in the least ashamed—"you have come after all. I—I was thinking you were dead."

She made a firm effort to blink back her tears. His face was singularly hard and unresponsive, and he had not even taken her hands.

"I am sorry I am late," he said stiffly. "I came as quickly as I could,"—which was not strictly true.

Cynthia stared at him, a very slow, hot colour creeping into her cheeks. "You are angry with me, Ted, angry with me, because I sent for you?"

"Perhaps I am," agreed the man. His eyes held hers for a moment. "Perhaps, 'afraid,' would be a better word to use. Does it amuse you to be hurt by things? Shall we go and sit down over there?" he went on, quick contrition in his voice. "I am a brute to talk to you like this, when I know how worried you must be about your friend. Let us sit down, and tell me what I can do to help."

"But, Ted," Cynthia turned to him as they sat down and laid a small, rather timid hand on his knee, "I did want to ask you about Elsie. But that wasn't half the real reason why I wrote to you; it was, because——"

Ted interrupted her. For one second his hand crushed down on hers where it lay on his knee; then he stood up, intentionally or otherwise, so as to get rid of it, and shifted his chair a little.

"Miss Weston," he said, "there is only one thing I want to ask of you: don't let us play with each other any more. The game is, so to speak, finished. I know you are engaged to be married; I saw it in the papers, though I did not write to offer my congratulations. For myself, well, you know your letter only just caught me in time. I threw up the work at office about a month ago, and moved into new lodgings yesterday. Father died, you know, just after you left London, and next week I am off. I have had a billet offered me in Australia, quite a fairly good one for me." He paused, digging holes in the ground with his stick, then lifted his eyes to meet hers. "You see how far apart our lives lie," he said:

his face was calm and unreadable. "I, for one, do not intend that either of us shall forget that again. Now, tell me about Miss Hart: it must have come as a terrible shock to you."

It was as if he had suddenly and sternly erected a barrier between them; all Cynthia's joy and relief at seeing him withered under the cold self-repression of his attitude. This was a new Ted, one who made no answer to the calling of her tune. How could she tell him all that her heart had planned?—Pride choked back her tears; she would not let him see how much she was hurt by his seeming indifference.

"I can't tell you much about Elsie," she explained, "because I know nothing. I recognized her picture in the paper yesterday and I came straight up to London. I thought I might go to her; I don't know that she will even thank me for that, but I just felt I should have to try."

"You are quite sure it was a picture of her?" Ted asked.

"Quite," Cynthia answered. "It was a copy of an old photograph Elsie used to have lying about in her drawers. I have often asked her to give it to me."

"They will let her off very lightly," Ted pondered the matter aloud, "even if they find her guilty. The man was such a brute: all his past life goes to prove that." He turned on Cynthia. "You would like to go over to the prison at once, wouldn't you, and find out if they will let you see her now?"

"Yes," agreed Cynthia—her thoughts were deplorably far away from Elsie.

"There are probably prison hours for visiting," Ted explained as they made their way there in a 'bus; "and very likely, it being a murder case, they won't let us in without a special permit; but at least we shall find out something about her: who is defending her, and so on."

His first surmise was correct; no one could see the prisoner without a permit, and then only at the regulation hour. They might also have failed in finding out much about her, had it not been for the fact that Douglas had left special orders that any one inquiring at the prison for his client should be sent straight on to him. To Denton Street, therefore, Ted and Cynthia hurried, taking a taxi all the way this time. Because of their nearness to each other, and aloofness from the rest of the world, they had to wage fierce war against their instinctive desires. "I love you," clamoured for utterance on their lips, and conversation was impossible under the circumstances. They sat stiffly erect and stared out of their respective windows.

Ted decided on their arrival that Cynthia should go in by herself. He did not really know anything of Elsie, and it would be better to confine the interview, he thought, to those who did. He would hang about outside and wait for her.

Douglas rose to greet Cynthia from behind a table littered with a profusion of papers, a great many of which had escaped on to the floor.

"You wish to see me in reference to Miss Hart?" he asked. His eyes, keen and curious, were taking in Cynthia's appearance, even to the minutest details,

such as how she wore her gloves and shoes. Here was a girl, different from the rest of Elsie's so-called woman friends, he knew at once, who came from the class to which Elsie herself must have belonged at one time. His photograph scheme had done some good, then.

"Won't you sit down?" he went on, pushing forward a chair for Cynthia; "then we can talk in comfort. It is the photograph that has brought you, isn't it?" He turned to his table and shifted the papers about, extracting finally a photograph which he handed to Cynthia. "That is the original, probably more recognizable than the reproductions, though on the whole they were not bad."

Cynthia sat staring at the pictured face. She had known before that it was Elsie's photograph in the paper, but this somehow brought it nearer, more home to her. Elsie had always refused to part with this youthful portrait of herself, because, so she had laughingly explained, it made her realize what she might have been if she had stayed good. And it was true; the photographer had caught her at a moment when all her nature had been alive with an eagerness to do well and greatly in the world.

Douglas watched Cynthia studying it. "Does it strike you how vividly eager she must have been in those days?" he asked. "I can see by your face that you know the picture well."

Cynthia laid the picture down and looked up at him. "It is Elsie," she explained simply; "that doesn't tell you much, does it? She was my one girl friend; we shared a flat together until—until——"

"Until—" prompted Douglas ; he drew his chair a little nearer hers. "Will you tell me all you know ? It may help me to clear up the muddled maze that lies all round my knowledge of her. I want to help her. I am as certain that she did not murder this man as I am certain of myself. Yet she won't deny it, won't in any sort of way defend herself. I haven't a ghost of a notion what her idea is. First, she is shielding some one else—that goes without saying—and secondly, I rather believe she hopes it may end in hanging." He leaned forward and took the picture back from Cynthia. "She gives me the impression that she would be glad to be finished with life," he said, and put it back face downwards on the table.

"And if we can't get her to own to being innocent," asked Cynthia, her face had gone white, "will they hang her ?"

Douglas laughed a little bitterly. "Good Lord, no," he said. "There's the tragedy."

Cynthia rose and came to stand near the table. "You are her friend," she said softly. "I am not afraid now to tell you Elsie's story. You will understand ; they say, don't they, that to know all is to pardon all. We will stand by her together, shall we ?" she held out her hand. "I failed Elsie once : you may be sure I will never, never, fail her again."

Douglas got to his feet too, and took her hands. "It is agreed," he said. "I want to do all I can to help her ; probably you, as a woman, will be able to do more. To-morrow I will get you a special permit to visit her ;

the case comes on on Tuesday. Now sit down again, and tell me all you know."

"Yes," agreed Cynthia; "but first there is some one waiting for me downstairs. I must go and tell him not to bother, because I am staying longer than I thought I should."

For that matter Ted had quite resigned himself to her prolonged absence, and, having purchased a paper, had ensconced himself on a seat in the hall. Not that he was paying much attention to the printed matter; but at least it served as an excuse for sitting there.

He laid it aside and stood up as Cynthia came down the stairs.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Cynthia. "I came downstairs to ask you not to wait. He is so nice," she confided, her face flushing, her eyes earnest, "and he likes Elsie; he is doing everything in his power to help her." She paused and glanced at Ted, whose face told her nothing of the conflict of emotion waging in his heart.

"I suppose I may as well leave you, then," he agreed. "You know your way from here, don't you—we are just off Shaftesbury Avenue. For that matter, very likely Mr. Douglas will see you home." He turned and gathered up his paper in rather a crumpled mass. "If I can do any more to help you," he said stiffly, "let me know, won't you?"

"But, Ted," Cynthia remonstrated, and unthinkingly she caught at his arm, "aren't you coming to see me? Shan't we meet somewhere, this evening, to-morrow?"

"Unless I can really help you," he answered. "I would rather be left out of it. I am immensely busy, you know, and——" his eyes refused to meet hers.

"And when do you leave for—Australia?" asked Cynthia.

"To-day fortnight," Ted answered. He turned away, apparently he was not going to take her hand to say goodbye.

Hot, burning tears scalded Cynthia's eyes and choked the words in her throat, but, as Ted did not turn to look at her, he was unaware of this. He only heard her turn and walk slowly up the stairs again, and with his heart heavy within him, he went out into the street. Not to go home, that was impossible: he hung about the place for another hour and a half, till he saw Cynthia come out and step into a taxi. She was escorted only as far as the door—that was some small consolation to Ted—by a man, with a brisk manner and a clear-cut, clean-shaven face. They parted very good friends; Ted could hear the man saying, "I hope so," as the taxi moved off.

Mattie answered Cynthia's wire with a long, incoherent letter, consisting chiefly of "whys" and agitations generally. Why had Cynthia gone without seeing Captain Hudson? Why had she not waited until the next day, when they could all have gone to town together? Why had she, at least, not taken Jimmie with her? Was she all right? Could Mattie come up the very next day and stay somewhere in the neighbourhood?

Not that Mattie was angry: she was afraid. Afraid of what the old surroundings, the old atmosphere and

circumstances, might do to upset Cynthia's attitude of calmness. Mattie had never been blind to the fact that Ted's influence had stubbornly refused to fade from her sister's mind. She knew that Cynthia was not radiantly happy in her new engagement. But Mattie was building all her hopes on the power of Time to wipe out even the deepest impression from the human heart, on the sterling worth of Ralph Hudson himself, on what home life, a husband, and probably children, would do to reconcile Cynthia to her path in life. And all these hopes were in danger of destruction, so Mattie thought, by this new move of Cynthia's. Not a word of such fears, however, did she breathe to either Jimmie or Captain Hudson.

The latter was philosophically calm on the subject of Cynthia's abrupt departure. Why should she not go and stay with a funny old lady friend in London, if she felt inclined? He wrote daily placid, bulky letters, that it is to be feared Cynthia never even read; and her absence in no way disturbed the tenor of his life, his meals, his duties or his games.

Cynthia was firm on the question of being left alone. "I don't want any one, honestly," she wrote Mattie; "in three days everything will be over and I shall come back. At present I can't think of any one or anything but Elsie." Which remark it may be noted was not strictly true. "She is so wonderful, Mattie, and so changed. I believe she likes to know I am near her."

And poor, agitated Mattie had perforce to be content with that.

CHAPTER XXIII

ELSIE FINDS A WAY OUT

ELSIE'S case occupied the Court only one short day. There was very little evidence to be put forward on either side. The girl claimed to be guilty, almost as if it were a triumphant right; what use in discussing the why and wherefore of a case in the face of that? Still there was a certain number of facts to be placed before the jury, and from the first the sympathy of the public had been on the side of the accused. They were anxious to hear all that could be said in her favour.

The murdered man had led a notoriously evil life. The doctor's evidence at the inquest went to prove that he must have been drunk at the time of his death—he had certainly been drinking hard for months beforehand. Apparently he had left not a soul behind him to regret his going.

One witness was called for the prosecution: a tall

good-looking girl, with coarse, bold features and wide hips. She had been with the dead man, she said, on the afternoon of the murder. He had been fuddled with drink and excessively quarrelsome, but he had stated between bouts of violence against her that she was the only girl he loved, and that he intended to give some other damned fool, who expected him to marry her, the go-by. She had never seen the woman he referred to, because she was a new friend of Durrant's, but she assumed her to be the prisoner in the dock. She had left the flat at 7 o'clock that evening, and she knew then that Johnnie was expecting this same woman whom he proposed to do in.

"He called her Claire," she mentioned, "or something like that; but he was always one for forgetting names, and never sober long enough to know a horse from a cow."

James Douglas winced at the insinuation. Elsie listened to it all, her face inscrutable, sitting stiff and straight in the chair which had been provided for her use in the dock.

Then the counsel for the defence rose to make his speech, a passionate, eloquent appeal. The prisoner's sex and youth, the record of the man she dealt with, the horribleness of his life. It was a good speech because it came straight from the man's heart, and something more than Douglas' clear brain and clever insight into the merits or demerits of a case lay behind its eloquence. The court was very silent while he spoke; from everywhere in the building one could hear the people breathing;

then, suddenly, in some far corner, a woman screamed and burst into hysterical sobbing, causing some commotion as she was carried from the court. Then the Judge rose, brief and restrained in his summing up. He complimented the counsel for the defence on his speech, touched lightly on the meagre evidence of the case, and on the prisoner's plea of "Guilty."

"We are not here," he said finally, addressing the jury, "to judge whether this man did, or did not, deserve death, but to decide whether this woman killed him deliberately, as she herself would have us believe, or unwillingly, acting in a moment of wild self-preservation against a man, who was to all intents and purposes mad."

The jury retired for ten minutes. James Douglas left his seat and came across to Cynthia.

"I have done what I can," he said. She noticed how tired and flat his voice seemed.

Then a stir in the Court announced the return of the jury and Cynthia rose blindly, clutching at Douglas' arm, her heart in her mouth.

"Guilty, my lord; but we strongly recommend the prisoner to mercy."

The female warder in the dock with Elsie nudged her to stand up, and the girl rose; her face betrayed not the slightest interest or excitement. She stood limply, head bowed, hands resting on the rail in front of her.

Cynthia did not follow the judge's speech; she heard his voice as in a dream, her eyes blinded with tears and fixed on Elsie.

Elsie had lifted her head, for the first time since the opening of the proceedings she seemed to be listening to what was going on round her. When the judge stopped speaking she was staring at him with horror written on her face and in her eyes.

"Does that mean you aren't going to hang me, then?" she asked, her voice curiously sharp with fear. "Oh, please, please——" She threw out her hands, swaying a little where she stood; then, before the woman standing at her side could catch her, she fell, crumpled up, it seemed, in a heap within the cramped space of the dock.

A wave of sympathy went through the court. "Poor thing, she has fainted!" one woman in the crowd voiced the feeling. Douglas sprang forward, but not in time to offer any assistance; already two warders had lifted the body and were carrying it from the court. It was no unusual thing for women prisoners to faint; the wave of sympathy passed, and there was a general stir and movement as the court cleared.

Not till an hour afterwards did Cynthia know definitely that Elsie had after all found a way out. From the first she had been afraid. She had felt it to be death, that limp, sagging body that the warders had hurried past with. When other people had talked of fainting, her own heart had risen up instinctively to contradict them.

"Elsie is dead," she had said to Douglas when he came back to her; "somehow, I know she is."

Then certainty had vanished as she and Douglas

waited in the prisoners' visiting-room off the court to hear the doctor's report, and she swayed between hope and fear every time the door opened. After half an hour Douglas was fetched by one of the attendants. "I will come back as soon as I can," he said in going, and after that Cynthia waited by herself.

Ted had been in the court, she remembered ; she wished he had come over and spoken to her : she had seen nothing of him since Saturday. Somehow, she wanted Ted and Ted's sympathy more than anything else in the world. What a terrible room this was she was waiting in, with the blank severity of its walls, the dingy drabness of its one uncurtained window, its long deal table, its wooden chairs. Would Elsie have to live for three years shut away in some prison even more desolate than this ? And Elsie had wanted death so desperately ; Cynthia had not realized how desperately until she had heard the passionate appeal in Elsie's voice as she faced the judge. How horrible life was sometimes ! How tangled and twisted the threads became ! Ted, why was Ted treating her like this, pushing her outside his life, ignoring her need of him ? Had he stopped loving her, could that be the reason ? Ted, where was Ted now ?— she did want Ted at this moment.

Yesterday she and Elsie had been talking about their life together, about the flat, about Elsie's illness and of her days after she had left Cynthia. Elsie had not cried in the telling, for all the tears in her heart had dried up years ago. One passionate longing kept her eyes quiet and steadfast. She wanted death. She did not even

regret very much. She clung tenaciously to the memory of her one brief dream.

"I have known love," she said to Cynthia; "after all, that is what I did ask from life. It doesn't count that he did not love me: besides, he did, I know he did, if only just for a little. I didn't ask for a love that would last, did I? It is only this last bit of my life that has been so hopelessly messed and tangled, and that has been my own stupid fault." A rather stiff smile had stirred on her face. "Anyway, I escaped office, didn't I?"

"But now forget all that," begged Cynthia. "When this case is over, when you come out of"—she gulped a little over the word—"prison, there will be no need for you to go back to that awful life, Elsie; there is another——"

Elsie interrupted her, laying a hand for one second on hers. "You have guessed that, have you?" she asked. "You were always great at spotting romances, West." She rose and moved over to the one small window, turning to face Cynthia. "Keep it a secret between us," she said. "Perhaps, I can own to you, that the knowledge of his liking has helped me more than a little through this time. But do you think I can take what he wants to give me, take it and drag it down to my level?" Her hands clenched at her sides, she turned away, her eyes on the scrap of sky she could see through the window. "It makes me a hundred times more anxious to die," she whispered to herself.

Then she had come back to Cynthia and sat down

again. "Love is the only thing worth having in this world, West," she said. "Oh, don't think my words are not worth anything just because my life has been such a failure. And by Love, I don't mean that you should just take what some man holds out to you, I mean that you yourself, should give, and give, and give. And when once you yourself have loved sufficiently to give, the mockery of anything else will be clear to you. Don't make a big mistake, West; don't take the mockery in preference to the real, because it seems to you safer and wiser; nothing else that you may find in life will make up to you for having lost love."

As Cynthia was recalling this interview, the door opened for the hundredth time and she looked up eagerly. James Douglas and another man, a short, fat, podgy, gentleman, with a red face and round-rimmed glasses, came in together. Douglas' face was white and set, she noticed first of all; the other man seemed a little perturbed and agitated about something. He kept taking off his glasses and rubbing them vigorously.

Cynthia stood up; knowledge had come back to her in a flash. "You need not tell me," she said: "I know; Elsie is dead."

The red-faced man nodded. "Very unfortunate," he ejaculated, breathing heavily on his glasses. Douglas had turned away and was staring out of the window. "She must have been tremendously strung up—weak heart—snap it went at the critical moment. Most unfortunate." He polished his glasses and resettled them on

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his nose. "Our friend there"—he nodded towards Douglas—"is a little upset. Quite natural, he defended her case magnificently. Poor girl, poor girl!" His flow of conversation stopped, and he blinked at Cynthia from behind his glasses.

She ignored his vague sympathy, and crossed the room to Douglas. "Shall we go home?" she asked, laying her hand for a minute on his. "There is nothing more for us to do, is there?"

The man swung round. "Don't you want to see her?" he asked, his voice bitter. "There is nothing about her now that makes her different from any other woman, except that she is dead. And she is smiling, content, quiet; she was glad to die."

"I know," answered Cynthia softly, "but I would rather go straight away, if you will take me."

"Very wise of you," whispered the fat doctor as he followed them outside, "taking him away. Poor fellow, he is much upset, and there is really nothing more for him or any one else to do."

In the cab driving home Cynthia turned to Douglas again.

"I wonder if you will understand me," she said, "when I tell you that I, too, am glad Elsie is dead. She wanted it so passionately. Did you realize how much she wanted it?"

"Why, in God's name, why?" the man asked. He sat forward in his seat, his face away from hers, frowning out of the window. "It was only three years; she would have got through that. "I"—his voice was

hoarse and strained—"I hoped to do so much for her."

Cynthia sat with her hands clasped on her knees staring in front of her. "I know," she answered presently. "You loved her." She paused a moment, and the man beside her moved restlessly. "And yet," she went on, "you could not have helped her really. Elsie spoke to me about it yesterday. Oh, don't think she did not value your love; it was only that she herself had nothing left to give. 'He knows all about me,' she said to me, 'and yet he cares. It makes me a hundred times more anxious to die. If I lived, in time I should see his love changing to distrust and contempt. I cannot wipe out all my life up till now; he will never be able to forget it. In time he would be ashamed to have loved a thing like me'."

"She did not understand what love is," Douglas answered. "I would have taught her."

"You could not have married her," whispered Cynthia; "the world would not have let you do that."

"Neither God, nor man, should have stopped me," he answered.

But Cynthia, sitting back in the shadows, shook her head gently; she and Elsie had known better than that.

Elsie's body lay waiting burial for three days in the mortuary of the prison, where she had been lodged before her trial. No one came to claim her and in the end the funeral expenses were defrayed by Douglas. Was the old father dead, Cynthia wondered, or was the village life, that Elsie had so often laughed at, sufficiently withdrawn from the world for this case and its much reported ending not to have reached it. There was no

lack of visitors, however, to the large, bare room with its white-washed walls and wide open window fronting the prison graveyard. All Mrs. MacNab's household brought their floral tributes—Mrs. MacNab herself contributing a marvellous erection of white lilies, intermingled with pink roses and a touch of heather. These, after the last visit had been paid, Douglas had placed in a heap in the furthest corner of the room. Elsie would have hated them, he felt sure. Only Cynthia's gift, a small, sweet-scented bunch of violets, he left lying as Cynthia had placed them, between the loosely clasped hands.

That was all the good-bye he could say to this woman whom he had loved. He had to go back to his work in the world after that, to crush down in his heart all the dreams and hopes and plans that had been working together in his brain almost since that first evening, when he had seen Elsie standing before him, with her frank, indifferent eyes, and the bloodstains on her dress. Her face haunted him through the nights, the eyes closed, the lips half smiling, as though she had won to her heart's desire; and that she had not even thought of him in going was somewhat of a bitter memory to face the days with.

"Now, more than ever, I want to die," Elsie had said to Cynthia. In the soreness of his heart Douglas forgot that. For Elsie had known—she had perhaps learnt the lesson in a somewhat relentless school—that no wiping out of the past is possible.

**"Times are as naught ; to-morrow He will judge,
Or after many days."**

Let the judgment fall on her alone : that had been her answer to his love. If she had lived, could she have had the courage to keep Douglas and all that he offered her out of her life ? And if he came into it, sooner or later, would not the punishment for her transgression fall on him too ? So she had prayed for death and found it. She could afford to smile ; and it added no bitterness to her rest that she had been able to save him, even from himself.

CHAPTER XXIV

WISE FOLLY

CYNTHIA wrote to Ted the next day asking him to come and see her. It would be her last chance, she realized, of saying all that had really been in her heart to say from the moment that she had made up her mind to come back; but she was still a little undecided as to which course to take. Perhaps Ted could have helped her in her decision. If he had argued his own case, pleaded his love for her, shown her by the slightest indication that his desire for her was as great and compelling as it had ever been, Cynthia would undoubtedly have given in to him. She had come to London half convinced in her own mind that Fate was too strong for her, and it was throwing her into Ted's life again. She had neither the strength nor the desire to hold back from it, and if he had held out his arms she would have run into them at their first meeting. But Ted had been seemingly indifferent; his attitude towards her had, as it were, thrown Cynthia back upon her own resources. Once more the hands of doubt and uncertainty were pulling her now this way, now that. All Mattie's wise arguments and tactful inferences were remembered in turn. Would marriage

with Ted mean all that Mattie had undoubtedly thought and hinted it would mean? Was she brave enough even to face the unpleasant difficulties that must lie in her path should she decide at this last moment to alter her plans and arrangements? What would Jimmie say? How would Mattie meet her, supposing she was to go to them now and say—"Listen, I have made a mistake, and I cannot marry Captain Hudson. I don't love him. Nothing counts but love; I love Ted"? Had she courage to stand up before her world and say "I love Ted"? Her own heart was so sure, and yet she needed his help before she could find the necessary courage. Hers was not the sort of character, as she had once said to him, that could face troubles alone and fight them down. Instinctively she wanted his will to stand beside her and push her through.

So finally, since he would not come to her unasked, she wrote Ted, and his answer was characteristic and disappointing. Undoubtedly he too had had his battle to fight, and he was perhaps a little tired of the struggle.

"Dear Cynthia," he wrote stiffly, "I have just had your letter asking me to call and see you to say 'good-bye' before you go back to Plymouth. The last time I saw you I said that if ever there was anything that I could do to help you, you were to write to me and I would do it. That is still true, but apparently your desire to see me this time is merely to say good-bye, and, dear,"—some of the stiff restraint gave way here—"I can't do it. That is the truth. If I came, if I saw you

again and held your hands, the wall which I have built up between us would crumble away, and out of very pity for me you would probably yield. And I have no use for pity, Cynthia. If you loved me I don't think I should be afraid to persuade you to give up things and come away with me. I haven't much to offer: nothing that could compare with the life I should be asking you to leave; but if you loved me, the other things would count for very little. As it is, pity won't help me and will only hurt you, so it is best to leave things as they are, isn't it? Good-bye, dear, and may you be very happy. Yours ever, Ted."

For two days Cynthia carried that letter about with her, and every day the wheel of thought started in the same place and went round and round in her head. She shed a great many tears during that time as incidentally she was of the opinion that Ted was being very unkind to her. She had planned secretly, perhaps unknown even to herself, that Ted should act as a shield between her and Mattie and Captain Hudson. He was to have done the explaining, the talking, the deciding for her. Now Ted stood aside, and Mattie wrote daily urging her to come back. Captain Hudson even talked of coming to fetch her, but Cynthia had written hastily pleading for two more days; she must stay in town, she told Mattie, until after Elsie had been buried, and she wanted that time all to herself. Mattie explained that to Ralph Hudson as best she could; what her own heart thought on the matter remains to be seen. On the third day Elsie was buried. Miss Powell would

have gone with Cynthia to the funeral, for, as she pointed out, all the bitter feelings she had ever felt towards Elsie had long since been forgotten, but, as it happened, she had had to leave town the day before to see to a sick relative in the country, and Cynthia went alone. It remained as a blurred memory of misery in her mind; the slow heavy voice of the clergyman, the drizzle of rain, the drab black of the undertaker's men as they moved about getting ready to lower the coffin. Then Douglas stepped forward to let fall the first clods of earth on to the coffin, and Cynthia realized that the clergyman was saying something about "Dust to dust, earth to earth." Was that the end of Elsie's story, she wondered vaguely, Elsie who had been so hot and eager for life and for everything that life could bring her. She was haunted with a vision of Elsie lying cold and still under the pressure of the wet earth, and she had to bite her lips to hold back the cry of revolt that rose to them. There is something terrifying in this hiding away of a thing we have loved under the earth; it makes death seem so irrevocable, so terribly relentless.

Miss Powell's flat was in darkness when Cynthia came back to it, and she had evidently not yet returned. A sense of loneliness added to Cynthia's feeling of depression; yet in a way she was glad of the solitude. For the last time to-night she must face her problem and decide what course to take. Her bag, packed and ready by the door, brought to mind the fact that that morning she had decided in favour of going back

to Plymouth, back to Mattie and the preparations for her wedding, back to Ralph and making the best of things so that other people should not suffer for her mistake. Her conscience had been a little uneasy about Ralph; she had lulled it with the assurance that she was taking the best and wisest course. And yet, what had Elsie said?—"The mockery of anything else will be clear to you." What right had she to offer the pretence to Ralph in exchange for his realities? With a sigh of absolute weariness—since that started the round of arguments all over again—she sat down on the bed. A small and feeble fire just blinked at her from among the ashes. Mrs. Thomas, Cynthia remembered dejectedly, always required four sheets of the *Daily Telegraph* to make a fire burn up, and on this occasion the very quantity of paper used had made it impossible for any flame to live.

It was all very dreary, very desolate. An odd fancy came to her that her life was just like that fire: to-morrow, when she went back, the last pathetic effort at a glow would be put out by one more enveloping fold of ashes—ashes of dead hopes, dead dreams, dead good intentions. If only Ted had been willing to help her, if he had lifted a hand, or kept his eyes on her to guide her to him through the maze of misunderstanding and mistake that was closing in all round her, there would have been a flame in her heart to-night, which would have been sufficient to warm all her life. Ted, where was Ted? what was he doing? How had he dealt with his fire; could he get any comfort from the cold, dead ashes?

To-morrow, she was to go home. Restless and unhappy, she rose and moved about the room ; supper was an impossibility, she had no heart to eat. There was some letters for her on the mantelpiece ; she had not noticed them before, but now she moved across and picked them up. The top one was from Ralph, the round, rather boyish hand sprawled across the envelope. Well, there was no need to read that ; to-morrow she would be home ; he could tell her all he had to say, probably it was only just what all his others had been. With a fantastic sense of humour, she stooped and dropped it, fat envelope and all, on to the tiny flickering flame. It was typical and just that his should be the last weight to smother her fire from life altogether. Then she picked up Mattie's letter and opened it.

"Dear," Mattie had written, "you are coming back to-morrow, and that is why, to-night, as I write you, I am trying to screw up my courage to tell you something that has been in my heart these many days. Have you thought, I wonder, that I am absolutely blind. Did you imagine that I did not know your secret ? Oh, dear little sister, you have grown very far from me in the last few years, but not so far that I have not been able to understand you. I have tried to be blind—you must not blame me for that—because I have known which path in life would be the happiest for you, and I have prayed and dreamt and hoped, that in time you too would come to the knowledge of that. But, this is what I want to write in this letter, don't think to please me by

carrying out a bargain which your heart has never entered into. Let your heart dictate to you, Cynthia. I, now as always, want only that you should be happy. Do you think I shall not have the courage to stand aside and be glad for you, even though you win happiness on a road not of my choosing? Oh, my dear, dear one, if you live to be a mother, some day you will understand."

The tiny flame in the grate had gathered heart; it threw up small points of flame that licked and curled round the fat letter which had been deposited on it. "There is life in me yet, it seemed to be saying; just watch how strong I am to burn this up; out of these ashes I may still build a fire and come to my own."

But Cynthia's eyes did not notice the fire; the hot tears had flooded over and were splashing one by one on to Mattie's letter as it lay on her lap. Even here she had failed, then, since Mattie had not been hoodwinked into thinking her happy.

A flurried knock at the door and Mrs. Thomas's untidy head thrust through the opening made her blink back the tears quickly and struggle to her feet.

"Want any letters posted, miss; thought as how I would look in on you and just see; shall be passing the post on my way home. My! look what's taken your fire, never thought when I lit it it would burn up so well; drew that badly this evening."

A sudden decision had come to Cynthia during this rambled speech. She moved quickly over to the writing-table and dropped to her knees before it.

"Will you wait a minute, Mrs. Thomas, while I write a note? I would like it to catch this last post."

"Sure and I will," agreed the lady as she opened the door wider and stumbled over Cynthia's bag on her way in. "There," she ejaculated with a heavy sigh, "I had forgotten you would be going to-morrow. The flats don't seem the same, miss, now you and Miss Hart have left. There ain't no life about the place. Mr. Short, he often says to me as how he misses you, and I am sure we all does."

"It is very nice of you to say so," answered Cynthia. Her letter was finished; it had not taken her long to write. Something in the wording of it had brought the colour flaming to her face and her eyes were shining not altogether with tears. "Mrs. Thomas," she confided, "you have always been so nice to me that I'll tell you my secret before any one else hears it. I am not going away to-morrow after all; I am going to stay on just for a little while, and then I am going to be married; I have just made up my mind."

"Lord, save us, Miss," remonstrated a bewildered Mrs. Thomas, "I thought as how you were engaged some long time ago; Miss Powell told me something about it."

Cynthia nodded, then she tiptoed gravely across and held out the envelope she had just addressed. "I know," she agreed, "but that is my secret; it is somebody quite different I am really going to marry, and that is the letter telling him about it. You see," she paused a moment, the tip of the envelope resting against her lips, "I have found out that the very

inside heart of me loves him, Mrs. Thomas, and there is no use pretending any more that I don't."

"Lord have mercy upon us," ejaculated Mrs. Thomas, as she stretched out a reverent if grimy hand for the letter. "Love does make us women do some audacious things, that's certain sure."

"Yes, doesn't it?" agreed Cynthia, She looked beyond Mrs. Thomas to where the fire, new life awake in its heart, was blazing away cheerfully, and her eyes grew very soft and wonderful as she looked. "Love gives us courage and strength and wisdom," she whispered, "and—yes," she nodded her head, a little smile creeping round the corners of her mouth, "I suppose it does make us audacious, Mrs. Thomas."

"You are sure as how it is all right to post it?" asked Mrs. Thomas as an afterthought from the door. She was still holding the letter as if it were some priceless and breakable piece of china.

"Quite, quite sure," laughed Cynthia. She was down on her knees on the hearthrug and, like the flame in the fire, the hope in her heart had leapt to life again. It was filling her body with a strange delicious intoxication and a sense of victory, since the fight was over and she had reached at last to her heart's desire.

Mrs. Thomas practically tiptoed from the room, shutting the door softly behind her. She had a feeling that she had a most important mission to fulfil, and she carried Cynthia's letter clasped to her heart. Perhaps the very feel of it brought back to her the days when Tom had been courting her and when love had made

her do all the admirable and foolish things she had had such leisure to repent ever since. Most love stories begin the same way and end far otherwise than we have planned.

But none of these harsh facts could touch Cynthia. In time the fire died out and the shadows gained chill possession of the room. But of this she was unaware; her heart had found its kingdom, and the wonder and glory of it shone out before her eyes.

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taken from the Building**

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